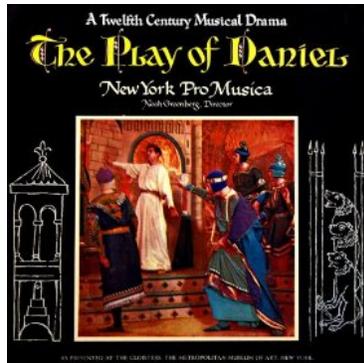


“The Play of Daniel: A Twelfth-Century Drama”-- New York Pro Musica, under the direction of Noah Greenberg (1958)

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Essay by James Gollin (guest post)*



Original album



Noah Greenberg

Noah Greenberg, The New York Pro Musica and the Resurrection of “The Play of Daniel”

The idea was preposterous. That in Anno Domini 1958 in New York, a six-hundred-year-old music drama, the retelling of an Old Testament story with strong Christian overtones, would captivate the city’s theatergoers and enchant its hard-bitten music and drama critics. But this is exactly what happened on January 2, 1958, when the pioneering early-music group, the New York Pro Musica Antiqua, gave New York and the world “The Play of Daniel.”

How this came about involved a cast of characters at least as rich as the cast of musician-actors who brought “Daniel” to life.

First among them was a 19th century French scholar of medieval music, Charles-Edmond-Henry de Coussemaker, who came upon a text of “Ludus Danielis,” in a 13th century British Museum manuscript, MS Egerton 2615. “Ludus Danielis,” drawn from the Biblical Book of Daniel, was one of the hundreds of dramatizations of Bible stories that brought the meaning of the Word of God to medieval worshippers. It was put on annually by the youth of Beauvais, a cathedral city in northern France. Egerton 2615 includes not only the text, but stage directions and the music of “Daniel’s” many melodies (given in the form of the neumes, notations of pitch and duration, in which liturgical plainchant was written). Coussemaker included all of “Ludus Danielis” in his four-volume compilation of medieval music. And there it remained unnoticed until the early 1940’s.

Enter the second character, an English headmaster named William L. Smoldon. Keenly interested in medieval music, Smoldon encountered “Ludus Danielis” in the pages of Coussemaker and thought it would make an excellent dramatic project for the boys of his school. He began work on a modern version. But as well as struggling to turn neumes into modern musical notation and make Latin plainchant and modern English go together, Smoldon found himself grappling with the question of whether instruments as well as voices were ever used in liturgical drama. Eventually, he decided. The decision was largely based on his reading of “Ludus Danielis”: instruments did have an essential role, and he said so in a chapter on liturgical drama in “The New Oxford History of Music.”

The third character, the main character in fact, is almost as improbable as “Ludus Danielis” itself.

Noah Greenberg, born and brought up in the Bronx, the son of Polish-Jewish refugees, never went to college. The two guiding stars of his youthful years were leftist politics and music. The politics led him to join the Socialist Workers Party, a tiny splinter group of devotees of the proletarian struggle, and then to leading an even tinier group of SWP members--including several attractive women, one of them Greenberg's first wife, Edith Schor--in labor actions against the wartime shipbuilding industry in California. Later, Noah returned to New York and, as a way of avoiding military service, joined the merchant marines.

Noah, still in high school, had studied orchestration and composition with a professional. Arnold Zemachson, his teacher, was the son of a noted cantor and the practitioner of a compositional style that somehow combined plaintive melodiousness and Bach-ian Baroque counterpoint. A second composer, Harold Brown, kindled Noah's interest in medieval and Renaissance music. The Second World War and Noah's venturesome wartime life intervened, and so did the tangled politics of the postwar period. But a 1950 trip to Pablo Casals's first Bach Festival in Prades, France, convinced Noah that he must make his living in music. At first, it was not much of a living. Noah's slender earnings from piano lessons and music copying had to be supplanted, in 1951, by summer work as a roofing salesman in the Bronx.

For pleasure, Noah had set aside Tuesday evenings for a quasi-professional group to sing part-songs and madrigals under his direction. The group included two sopranos, a baritone, a bass, a cellist and two young men who had learned to play the early woodwinds known as recorders. This group was the nucleus of the New York Pro Musica, which came into legal being on March 29, 1953 and gave its first concert not quite a month later.

Through one of the two recorder players, Bernard Krainis, Noah learned of an exceptional singer, also a young man, who considered himself a lyric tenor, but who could reach notes higher than the highest in a tenor's normal range. Russell Oberlin started singing at age six, to help overcome a speech impediment, then sang for pay throughout his childhood and graduated from The Juilliard in New York in 1948, at age twenty. The beautiful quality of his voice and his easygoing temperament brought Russell engagements enough so that he never had to hunt for work. Krainis persuaded him to sing with Noah Greenberg's new ensemble.

Noah knew that early European music is inextricably bound up with Catholic liturgical music. This shaped his creation of a 1954 concert program, "The Virgin in Medieval and Renaissance Music," for the New York Pro Musica, by then very much a going concern. The program featured Mass settings by early Renaissance composers Josquin Desprez and Cristobal Morales and also several of the medieval Marian antiphons, works of plainchant in honor of the Virgin Mary sung in monasteries to this day.

To write the notes for this program, Noah turned to Rembert Weakland, a young Benedictine monk who was also a classical pianist and musicologist. Weakland's notes were so knowledgeable that Noah invited him to consider the linguistic and musical problems presented by "Ludus Danielis." Noah himself had read William Smoldon's chapter on liturgical drama and "Danielis" in the "Oxford History of Music." It fascinated him. Weakland, fascinated in turn, spent the summer of 1956 putting "Danielis" into modern musical dress.

Noah now had the delicate task of persuading Smoldon that his ideas of how to present the play--a dozen or more musicians playing modern instruments--were at odds with Weakland's transcriptions of the music. Smoldon, gentlemanly to the core, responded to Noah in May 1956 by urging him to go on with the Weakland version.

By mid-October of 1956, Noah was able to tell Weakland and Smoldon that Pro Musica would perform "Ludus Danielis," in the original Latin, and would do so at The Cloisters, the home of medieval art of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With the Metropolitan's agreement in hand,

Noah was prepared to follow up on production details. The first of these was, simply, who was going to pay for the production? Who would be Noah's "angel"?

The angel was Lincoln Kirstein, six feet five inches of heir to the Filene's retailing fortune, patron of the arts (including The Museum of Modern Art and the American Ballet Theatre), eccentric, easily bored, himself an artist *manqué*; in all a strange personality. Grumbling, complaining, a modernist in love with the past, a great admirer of Noah, Kirstein wrote check after check to cover the cost of producing "Ludus Danielis."

Then there was the problem of the script. Who could follow a disjointed Bible story written in medieval Latin? The answer was to tighten the narrative, at the same time commenting on it in English. Noah won the consent of the British poet W.H. Auden, a Greenwich Village neighbor, to create a poetic narrative that would bridge the gaps between the episodes in "Ludus Danielis" and make the story compelling to modern audiences.

To bring a centuries-old drama to life on stage required an imaginative director, and Noah had found a perfect candidate, Nikos Psacharopoulos, the director of the Williamstown, Massachusetts Summer Theater Festival and of many of its productions. Robert Fletcher of Lincoln Kirstein's American Ballet Theatre was retained as the "Danielis" costume and stage designer. Four extra male singers were hired.

Also needed and found were a sackbut (medieval trombone) or two, viols and a shrill precursor of the violin called a rebec.

Noah, for once comfortably solvent by virtue of Kirstein's patronage, even went so far as to order a copy of a medieval portable organ from a maker in Germany. This, as the name suggests, is carried by its player. Its air is supplied by a bellows operated by the player's left hand. Its keyboard is played by the right hand. Other rare instruments--a vielle, or medieval hurdy-gurdy, a psaltery and two minstrel's harps--were purchased. A buisine or medieval straight trumpet was found in the office of S. Lane Faison, a Williams College professor of art history; and a trumpeter, Robert Montesi a Yale School of Music graduate, was retained to play it. A set of handbells was borrowed from the Brearley School in Manhattan.

Noah had the idea of associating different characters with different percussion instruments, so that Queen Esther was identified with finger cymbals, Daniel himself with small cymbals, the counsellors with sleigh bells and so on. From Stuart Gardiner, music director of The Little Church Around the Corner, Noah borrowed seven boy choristers. Daniel's hungry lions, two in number, were played by Converse M. Converse and Rex Robbins, newly graduated from Yale.

The first read-through of Pro Musica's "Play of Daniel," to give it the English name by which it is now known, was held on Sunday, November 3, 1957. Additional rehearsals took place in November, with the first full-length run-through held at The Cloisters on December 1 and a singers' rehearsal two weeks later. After a hiatus of a couple of weeks, Noah scheduled nine hours of rehearsals on the weekend of December 28-29. The dress rehearsal was held on Monday, December 30. And the first of the seven planned performances at The Cloisters was given on the afternoon of January 2, 1958.

"The Play of Daniel" was a hit beyond Noah's--or anyone's--expectations.

The next day, "The New York Times's" Edward Downes called Pro Musica's production "superb . . . the music, which combines Gregorian chant, Gothic conductus [processional music] and echoes of folk dance and song, contributes immeasurably to heighten the emotional tone." Brooks Atkinson, "The Times's" lead drama critic, wrote later in January: "Nothing so fine as this has been done in New York in recent memory."

So enthusiastic was the critical reception, and so strong the demand for tickets, that Pro Musica scheduled an additional performance in the huge nave of the Riverside Church, at Broadway and 122nd Street. Riverside's nave could seat 2,500, but when requests for tickets exceeded 9,000, Riverside had to schedule two more performances, and even so, many would-be attendees found themselves out of luck.

Before the end of January, Israel Horowitz of Decca Records, a friend of Noah's from their leftist high school days, contacted Noah. Horowitz, Decca's A&R (Artists and Repertoire) director, was helping Decca become a major classical-music label on a par with RCA Victor and Columbia. Now he wanted to know if his old pal Noah would record "Daniel" with Decca.

Noah trusted Iz Horowitz, and on Wednesday, January 29, 1958, Pro Musica showed up at the Pythian Temple on West 70th Street in Manhattan, for the first of three "Daniel" recording sessions. The Pythian building, once the New York clubhouse of the Knights of Pythias fraternal organization, had leased its dusty unused ballroom to Decca as a recording studio.

Working with Decca art director Mort Nossiter, Horowitz designed a custom package for the new recording. This featured a "gatefold" cover, on which is a color photograph of Charles Bressler in a white robe as Daniel, surrounded by actors garbed as Babylonian soldiers. The title, in medieval-style lettering, is "A Twelfth-Century Musical Drama / The Play of Daniel / As Represented at The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York." The interior features notes on staging by Nikos Psacharopoulos, on costumes by Robert Fletcher, and a translation of the Latin text by French medievalist Jean Misrahi.

"Daniel" on record has proved to be a highly durable product. In its "Gold Label" series, Decca issued "Daniel" in monaural and stereo LP format, and when cassette tape players became popular in the mid-1980s, released it as an 8-track stereo cassette cartridge. Later, Decca reissued "Daniel" on its less-expensive Brunswick label in both monaural and stereo formats. Later still, Decca reissued it for a second time under its own name; and three further LP reissues, by Archiv, Coral and Chant du Monde, were done for France and the European market. At present (2014), compact disks (CDs) of "Daniel," most of them copied from the Decca "Daniel" LPs--the tapes of the original Decca recording sessions have long ago vanished--are available from various sources.

"Daniel" in live performance proved to be equally durable--to have "legs," as theater people say --not only as a domestic hit but as an international one.

In 1959, Pro Musica performed "Daniel" six times at the Chapel of the Intercession in uptown New York. The US Department of State teamed up with the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) to send Pro Musica overseas. During the spring of 1960, the ensemble presented "Daniel" in some 40 performances at ten locations, including London's Westminster Abbey and the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. The final performance in Europe was given at King's Lynn in Norfolk, with Elizabeth the "Queen Mum" of England in the audience.

"The Play of Daniel," wrote an anonymous critic after a British performance, "gives a valuable chance to adjust Norfolk's distorted view of American civilization, by presenting...the preoccupation of many [American] intellectuals with medieval art, and their perfectionist approach to its presentation."

In each of the three following seasons (1960, 1961, 1962), Pro Musica gave "Daniel" at a new Manhattan location, St. George's Church, Stuyvesant Square. Within a few years, "Daniel" became a New York Christmas-season fixture, on a par with Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors" and Lionel Barrymore's radio version of Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol."

A highlight of 1964 was a seven-week tour under State Department sponsorship of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. This, starting in September, took Pro Musica from Moscow to Tblisi to Yerevan to Baku, Piatogorsk, Kiev and Minsk.

The year 1965 started with two January performances each of “Daniel” and a second liturgical drama, “The Play of Herod,” at the Washington Cathedral.

In June began three weeks of taping for a National Educational Television production of “The Play of Daniel,” for which NET had agreed to pay Pro Musica \$18,500. The entire production, as it turned out, had to be done at The Cloisters on Monday, the one day of the week on which The Cloisters is closed to the public. Preliminary work began at six o’clock on the evening of Sunday, June 20. The actual taping began at 6:30 the next morning and went on for nearly 24 hours. Not until 3 a.m. on Tuesday were the two sleepy lions awakened to “pounce upon Daniel,” as the Metropolitan Museum’s “Bulletin” later reported.

The fall and early winter of 1965 seemed like many another Pro Musica season. There were board meetings, personnel problems, a lengthy and successful tour, a spat with the British musicologist and choir director Denis Stevens, “Daniel” performances and a New York City transit strike to contend with.

And death.

On Saturday, January 8, 1966, with a Pro Musica appearance in Brooklyn scheduled for the same night, Noah, at lunch with his wife Toni, went into the restaurant men’s room to exercise an aching arm and suffered a heart attack. Taken to a nearby hospital, Noah seemed to be recovering but, early the next morning, the hospital reached Toni with the news that her husband had died. The cause was an aneurism of the aorta, the artery supplying blood to the heart. Noah Greenberg was two months shy of his 47th birthday.

James Gollin’s biography, “Pied Piper: The Many Lives of Noah Greenberg,” won a 2002 ASCAP Deems Taylor award as one of its year’s “outstanding” books on a musical subject. Gollin has played keyboard instruments since his childhood. He has served as editor of “Early Music America” and is also the author of four novels. Gollin lives in New York City.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.