

What is a Golem?

In Hebrew Golem means “an unformed substance” or “shapeless mass,” but can also refer to a living creature made from clay or earth. (Adam, the first man, was a Golem before God breathed life into him.) The notion that man can imitate God in the act of creation occurs in early Jewish texts as a spiritual exercise, to be undertaken only by the most pious. Medieval texts and Kabbalistic writings provided “recipes” for Golems, starting with an earth or clay figure brought to life by spells, incantations, or inscriptions. These creatures were imperfect, lacking a soul and the ability to speak, but they were strong and apparently indefatigable, making them useful as household helpers. They followed orders to the letter, which could lead to complications, as in the case of the Rabbi’s wife who ordered their Golem to fetch water for the kitchen pot, but forgot to tell him when to stop.



In the 19th century a story emerged of a Golem built by Rabbi Loew ben Bezalel, Maharal of Prague (1513-1609) to protect the Jewish people from persecution and violence. Rabbi Loew’s Golem fulfilled this mission, but had to be destroyed when he began to rebel. The story appears to be apocryphal: in truth, there is no evidence that Rabbi Loew actually built a Golem and Prague under the rule of Rudolph II (1552-1612) was relatively tolerant of both Jews and Protestants. However, a literary version of this story was published in 1847, and either the original folktale or its written version is thought to have inspired Goethe’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

The story and its variations continued to resonate with Jews and non-Jews alike. Confined to ghettos, forbidden to protect themselves from libel and violence, Jews endured centuries of oppression. The idea of a Golem whose sheer presence and powers once influenced emperor must have been heartening, and one version of the tale places the Golem’s remains in the *Altneuschul* in Prague, awaiting the time when his services are again needed. Some see the film as an eerie foretelling of the Holocaust to come.

Today, variations of the legend can be found in popular media, including episodes on the *X-Files* and *The Simpsons*, and Golems even appear as video game characters. Prague has embraced the Golem as a symbol of the city, and tourists can find Golem statues, street mosaics, and key chains.

Beneath the modern interpretations of the Golem as protector, monster or souvenir lies a cautionary tale. What happens if the creator of the Golem lacks “purity of purpose,” one of the caveats? What happens if someone forgets to deactivate the Golem? Or, most frightening, what happens if the Golem begins to think for himself? Debates on the wisdom and consequences of both genetic engineering and artificial intelligence make the cautionary tale relevant in our own time.

The Golem, How He Came Into the World

Paul Wegener's 1920 film *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* reflects the strange brew of fantasy and reality that characterizes the Golem legend. It is a prequel to Wegener's two earlier Golem films—*The Golem* (1915) and *The Golem and the Dancing Girl* (1917), a comedy set in modern times. The 1920 film is based on the story of Rabbi Loew, set in 1580 with a fictional "Ludwig" as the emperor.



Why did the Golem fascinate Wegener, a Roman Catholic? Its pacifist message probably resonated with all post World War I Germans. Wegener himself had served in the German army on the Western Front, quickly suffering a mental and physical breakdown as a result. He returned to a country economically depressed and weary of fighting. Symbolist Gustav Meyrink's Golem novel, serialized in a 1914 Swiss pacifist magazine, apparently served as a catalyst for Wegener's first Golem film in 1915. While its hallucinogenic non-linearity made it useless as a film script, its expressionist approach may have encouraged Wegener to experiment with photographic techniques, lighting, set design, and acting methods. Wegener himself played the Golem—six feet six inches tall, and wearing a wig reminiscent of an ancient Egyptian or a medieval page (or perhaps the little Dutch boy) he lumbers through the film, gradually registering a range of emotions on his distinctive slab of a face—confusion, anger, love, and tenderness.

Cinematographer Karl Freund (*Metropolis*) used visual techniques and lighting reveal the dichotomy between the Jewish and Christian communities. The expressive, spiritual life of the ghetto is filmed in a rich tonal palette—black, white, and every shade of gray in between. In contrast, the shallow and silly Christian court is brightly lit. The outsized scale of the city gate emphasizes the barrier between the inhabitants of city and ghetto. The ghetto itself, designed by architect Hans Poelzig, was intended to communicate the supernatural, mysterious aspects of the tale, with the organic, twisted buildings reflecting the tortured psychic nature of the people who lived inside them. This three-dimensional set, a first for the time, required the camera to

move around it obliquely, exploring its winding passages, curved staircases, cut-away walls, and quirky Gothic decorations.



The film also explores Christian/Jewish relationships—the rabbi and the emperor share an interest in the occult, the knight Florian is captivated by the beautiful Miriam. In Ludwig's court, Rabbi Loew attempts to bridge the cultural gap by showing the history of his people in a movie-like flash-back, which provokes laughter and near-disastrous results. In the end, the Golem is deactivated by a Christian child.

The film was an immediate success, putting Germany in the forefront of the horror/fantasy genre, and Wegener was praised as an innovative director and actor. In 1923 *The Golem* ran for 10 months in New York City. Along with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), it stands as an early example of German Expressionism in film: highly subjective, non-realistic, and symbolic.

The Music

Silent films were never meant to be silent; they were accompanied by an orchestra playing a specially composed score, or a theater organist improvising as he watched the screen. Today, many musicians are restoring those original scores or writing new ones. HESPERUS is doing something different. We create film scores using music that has some connection to the film---from the same country, time period, or culture. Audiences tell us that this connection creates an emotional link that makes the silent film more absorbing, its action more persuasive.



HESPERUS scores combine preexistent pieces and improvisations over those pieces. Some are single-line tunes, others are 3 or 4-voice compositions, all selected from a specific genre (such as music from Medieval France or the American Civil War) for their flexibility and emotional punch. During the film we transform these tunes, changing their scoring, tempo, and mood to match the action on the screen. While the general outline of these changes has been agreed-upon and rehearsed before, surprises do happen—that's the improvisational component. We use some tunes to personify individual characters, others reflect moods and feelings—love, foreboding, rejoicing or fear. This combination of written music and improvisation is our homage to those original musicians from the 1920s.

'The Golem' is set in late 16th century Prague, a little too early for klezmer, with its roots in the music of 18th century itinerant Jewish musicians traveling with the gypsies through the Balkans and the Ukraine. We've used tunes from the Sephardic (Spanish Jews exiled in 1492) and Ashkenazic (Jews from Germany and Western Russia) musical traditions. They shared many of the same musical modes, though Sephardic music



is sung in *Ladino*, a mixture of Spanish, Yiddish, Hebrew and the local vernacular; and Ashkenazic is primarily in Yiddish and Hebrew.

Although many Sephardic tunes are very old, it's hard to establish when they were written—with texts centering upon life's milestones, birth, marriage, holidays, they were transmitted orally from mother to daughter for centuries and only began to be collected and transcribed in the late 19th century.

The development of Ashkenazic religious music was better documented, particularly the MiSinai melodies; late medieval tunes still used today for special religious occa-

sions. Although the early origin of these tunes has been confirmed, many of them sound quite modern because their melodies were based on German folk tunes. Tune sharing was common in early modern Europe in both Jewish and Christian traditions—lyricists would cross genres, appropriating any popular melody and setting new words to it about a recent event like a hanging, a battle, or a terrible storm.

For the court scenes, and elsewhere as a contrast, we play 16th century renaissance dances. You'll see the courtiers dancing a pavan, accompanied by an ensemble of capped reed instruments called crumhorns.



In 16th century Prague, Jews and Christians used many of the same instruments: lutes; viols; wooden flutes; drums, tambourines and shakers; the cornetto (a wooden trumpet); the 10-course Spanish guitar; the old fashioned vielle and rebec; and the newer violin, invented around 1530. We've added oud, shofar and ney to reflect the mystery and moodiness of the ancient tale. Just before the film starts we'll introduce our instruments, and during the film you can choose to watch either the screen or the performers.

The Golem is HESPERUS' fourth 'History's Soundtrack' presentation--part of the ensemble's mission to bring history alive through collaborations with theater, film, world music and mime. For more about HESPERUS visit www.hesperus.org or www.classactson tour.com (click on HESPERUS). For a list of music we're playing today or a bibliography about The Golem legend, please contact us at mail@hesperus.org.

Sasha Bogdanowitsch is a vocalist, multi-instrumentalist & composer whose work has ranged from writing for chamber ensembles and multitrack tapes with live performance to music for unique ensembles and live and recorded music for theater, dance and film. He has composed music for numerous theater, dance & film projects such as the television film scores, 'Burkittsville 7' and 'Shadow of the Blair Witch,' 'Grimm,' a 2006 multimedia dance theater work and 'Hidden Circle,' an interdisciplinary work for voice, movement & visuals. Sasha is currently at work on his new multimedia work, "He Who Saw Everything," based on the epic of Gilgamesh. Some of the artists he has worked with include: SaReel Project, composer Lou Harrison, American Festival of Microtonal Music, choreographers Faith Pilger & Otis Cook, and Meredith Monk's CD, 'Impermanence' for ECM Records.

Tina Chancey is a founding member and director of Hesperus; a frequent guest artist with the Terra Nova Consort, Ex Umbris and Altarasa; and a former member of the Folger Consort, Ensemble for Early Music, the multi-media music theater group QUOG, and the early music/rock band Blackmore's Night. She specializes in bowed strings from Appalachian and Irish fiddle to kamenj, viola da gamba, vielle and pardessus de viole, for which she received two Solo Recitalist grants from the National Endowment for the Arts to present debut recitals at the Kennedy Center and Weil Recital Hall. Dr. Chancey is currently developing a method to teach early music improvisation based on Keith Johnstone's *Theatresports* model. Tina teaches, performs, produces recordings and directs the SoundCatcher Workshop, teaching amateur musicians how to play by ear. Her newest solo recording is "The Versatile Viol: Tina Chancey plays Scottish and Irish Music."

A native of Cincinnati, **Emily Eagen** recently moved to New York City after spending five years performing, studying, and teaching in the Netherlands, which she first visited on a Fulbright Fellowship for early music. Since moving New York, Emily has been a soloist with the New York Continuo Collective, the Dryden Ensemble and Lyra Davidica; and is a member of the Medieval Mediterranean ensemble Sendebär and the contemporary vocal ensemble The M6, which performs the music of Meredith Monk. Emily is on the faculties of the Amherst Early Music Festival and the Augusta Heritage Center, where she has taught Sephardic, Medieval, and Renaissance repertoire as well as vocal technique and improvisation. Also a professional whistler and two-time International Whistling Champion, Emily creates and performs original works based on early music for voice, whistling, and viol with her ensemble EARL.

Carlo Valte is an active performer and educator in New York and abroad. His interest in Medieval and Near Eastern music led him to study oud with Simon Shaheen, as well as with Nasser Houari in Rabat, Morocco. Recent performance venues include Alice Tully Hall, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, L'Auditori de Barcelona, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lincoln Center's 'Out of Doors' Series, the Museo Tamayo (Mexico D.F.), and the United Nations. Carlo is currently on the faculties of Mannes College of Music Prep and the Union Settlement Association. He has given workshops and educational programs with *Sendebär* (www.Sendebär.com) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Queens College (CUNY), and at many public and independent schools in the Tri-state area, and since 2005, has acted as an ensemble coach for the annual New York Guitar Seminar. Carlo has recorded for One Soul Records, Vienna Modern Masters and N.Y. Collegium.