

# Shalom

CONNECTING THE ATLANTIC JEWISH COMMUNITY

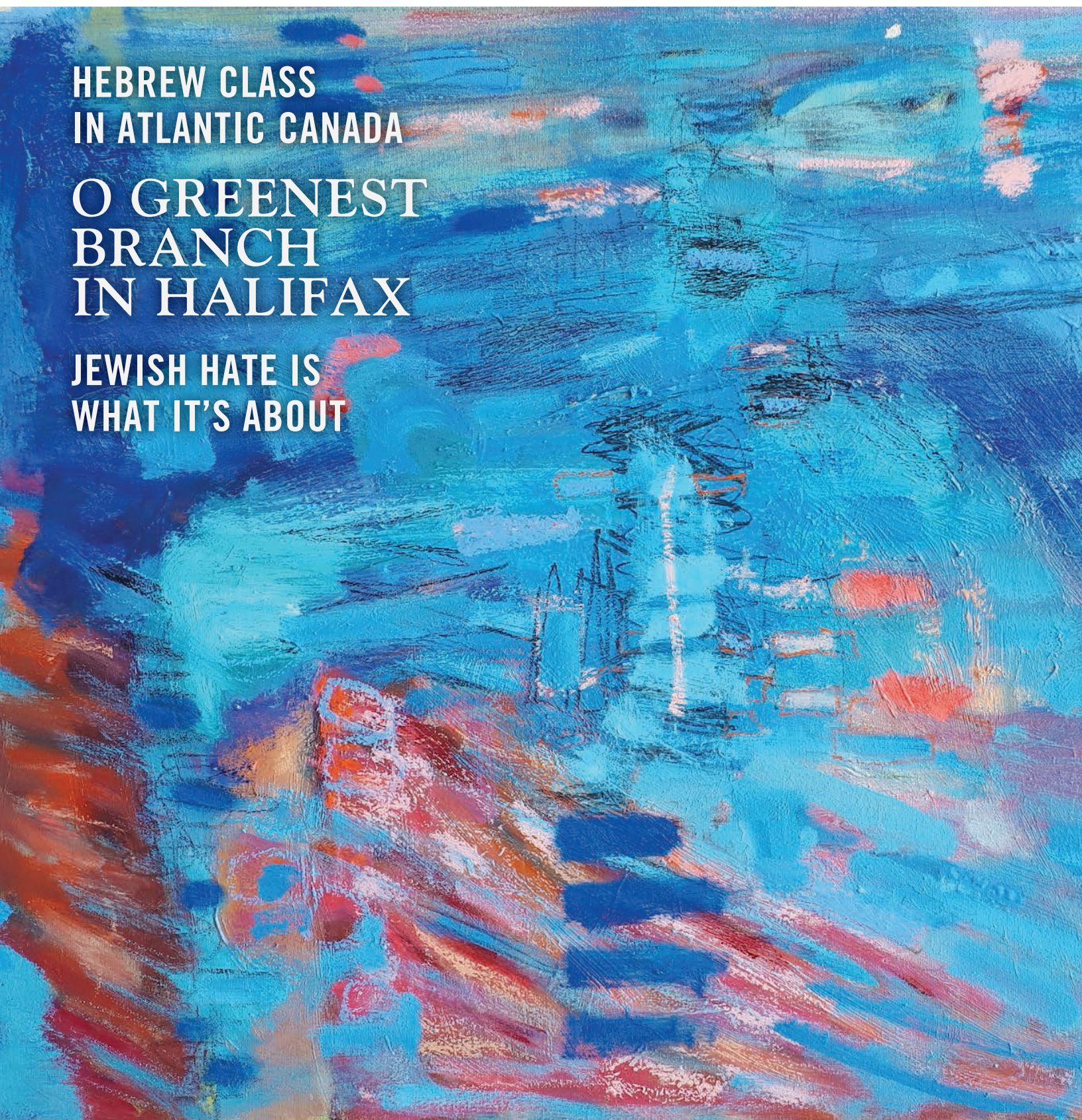


FALL 2021

HEBREW CLASS  
IN ATLANTIC CANADA

O GREENEST  
BRANCH  
IN HALIFAX

JEWISH HATE IS  
WHAT IT'S ABOUT





# JAMES ROLFE AND VOCALYPSE PRODUCTIONS PRESENT: O GREENEST BRANCH IN HALIFAX

## OCTOBER 21-24

BY PEGGY WALT

*Many of us have been missing live music during the pandemic (especially Jewish music since the last Gilsig Series in Jewish Arts and Culture event). Peggy Walt chatted with composer James Rolfe about his new song cycle, O Greenest Branch, debuting in Halifax this fall.*

No stranger to Halifax audiences and musicians, James Rolfe has written new works for pianists Simon Docking and Barbara Pritchard “that should have been premiered by now.” He’s hopeful that these postponed premieres will happen this fall. His opera *Beatrice Chancy* (set in 19th century Annapolis Valley) with writer George Elliott Clarke premiered in 1999 in Halifax, and, he’s collaborated with Halifax soprano Janice Jackson.

Jackson, who is producing Hildegard von Bingen’s opera, *Ordo Virtutum* (c. 1151) through her Vocalypse Productions organization, invited the prolific composer to write a companion piece, for which he mingled Jewish texts with texts by von Bingen, the composer nun, philosopher, mystic and writer who was canonized by the Roman Catholic church.

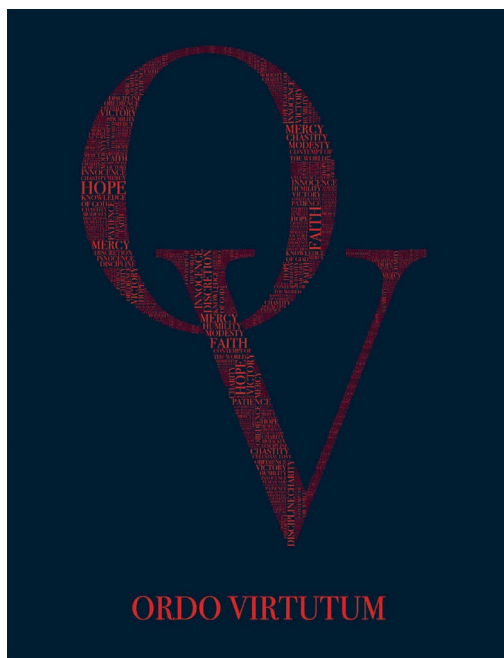
“I really like Hildegard a lot,” Rolfe said. “Her music has a real glow from within. I don’t know how else to put it. There’s a real spiritual strength and presence to it, that transcends the fact that it’s close to 1000 years old.”

He also loves the mix of early and modern music: “It’s a natural match for me. I love concerts where you mix different styles. I kind of like the contrast. They speak to each other.”

*Ordo Virtutum* is one of the first morality plays, and perhaps one of the first operas. Full of nature imagery, the music stands in stark contrast to events of the time period. “The beauty and devotion of Hildegard’s music are still fresh today; yet, at the same time and in the same place it was created, mobs were murdering Jews in the name of Christianity. To try to reconcile the jarring dissonance between these stories, I have set to music two mediaeval Hebrew poems—which mourn the Jewish victims of Crusader massacres which occurred during Hildegard’s lifetime—alongside three texts of Hildegard and a 20th-century lament by Chaim Nachman Bialik.”

The composer explains his juxtaposition of these dissimilar worlds, mentioning the inspiration that he drew from his own family’s history. Rolfe didn’t know he was Jewish until he was eight or nine. He remembers his mother asking him, “You know you’re Jewish, right?” He replied, “No.”

His mother was born in Berlin, with parents from Leipzig and



Frankfurt, who all had to flee in 1938. They got to England where his mother married a British man; the family immigrated to Canada in 1955. His mother’s family “had been secular for generations,” she lost older relatives to the Holocaust. Rolfe’s mother went back to Germany a couple of times, but “it creeped her out.” The composer has also visited Berlin, finding it “very loaded.”

Rolfe remembers his grandmother as a very warm person and a wonderful cook who was culturally Jewish; he associated Judaism early on with generosity and food. Asked if he personally identifies with Judaism, he replies, “I do think of myself as Jewish, but it has taken a while to get my head around that. I got more in touch when my daughter decided to do her bat mitzvah, and we went to synagogue during that time, and I found myself very affected by the music, especially. I was in tears often, and just really moved. The composer

part of me was thinking, this is interesting, this is important. I don’t know if I’m more observant, but I’m much more in touch. I’ve learned how to chant Torah from the scroll and as you get older, it’s nice to take on a challenge of that nature.”

Although he’s composed other works on Jewish themes, the new piece stands out for him, and he hopes will resonate with audiences. “This work opened a door for me to deal creatively with my family history: I am descended from Rhineland Jews who survived centuries of exile and violence, from the First Crusade in 1096 through to the Holocaust. We all live in the shadow of genocide, whether it took place in Canada or elsewhere; I hope that what is personal for me will also connect to listeners.”

Reflecting further, he says, “I thought, my ancestors on my mother’s father’s side come from the Frankfurt area, quite close to where Hildegard was operating, and because they were Jewish, they had a very difficult perspective on living in those times. They suffered through various pogroms, and I thought it was very striking to me that these things happened at the same time. I came across these poems from the time by German Jews, written in Hebrew, they recounted these episodes, and how the Jews dealt with them, spiritually, I guess, and it was really a striking contrast with the Hildegard texts.”

Another poem in *O Greenest Branch* is by famous Jewish writer



James Rolfe



Chaim Nachman Bialik (*On the Slaughter*), recounting the massacre that Bialik lived through in 1905 Bialystok. “It’s such a powerful poem, obviously

by somebody who has seen it, and is in the red-hot grip of sorrow that it had produced.” The composer worked with a translation he’d found, but ‘massaged’ it in order to “make it sing.”

The twenty-minute work is funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and scored for women’s chorus, soprano, organ and percussion. Rolfe wrote it in 2018-19, and it incorporates a chanting of the *Shema*. The performance takes place in late October at St. Patrick’s Church in Halifax’s North End.

Asked about the choice of location, Rolfe said, “It doesn’t matter to me what the venue is. The thing is, that classical music, so to speak, its roots are in the church, there’s no way around that. To me a church is a spiritual place, and it’s a particular acoustic, and for the Hildegard and for the parts of my piece that are strongly related to the Hildegard, it kind of makes sense to belong in a church. The roots of this music are there, the ways of perceiving it sonically. The acoustic is very much what I had in mind, something which has a warm, resonant sound.”

He admits that attending performances in a church can be challenging for some.

“I’m partially Jewish and partially Christian, in terms of my background, I think it’s kind of a nice idea that there can be a dialogue. It could be played in a synagogue, and that would be great as well. You are dealing with the Crusades, things being done in the name of religion contrasting that with the gentle message of Hildegard. Things seem so charged these days when we talk about “The Church.” The word reconciliation is being booted around a lot. From the Jewish point of view, we’re going to this Christian place, and putting something Jewish out there as well. It puts it in a bigger cultural context.”

Rolfe has visited memorials in Germany, particularly struck by one in Frankfurt composed of a wall of small rectangles of alphabetized names of victims; “I found the names of people I knew. That was very, very striking. I went to Sachsenhausen, where a great uncle had been sent. It’s a very profound, turbulent kind of feeling going back. It’s getting to be so long ago, but I knew the people who lived through it, my mother is still alive (now 93), and I knew my grandparents. To put myself in their shoes, I can’t even imagine.”

We talk about Edmund de Waal’s *The Hare with Amber Eyes* and his latest *Letters to Camondo*, in which the ceramicist and author revisits family history and the great homes that his Jewish family lost in Vienna and Paris. Rolfe can relate. “He comes from a wealthy family in Vienna; my family was also wealthy but in Leipzig.” He finds it hard to imagine having “to flee. And to leave behind all these wonderful things. They were art collectors, (my grandmother) had Kadinskys and Klees, she had some really nice paintings, which she stored in a warehouse in Hamburg, which turned out not to be a great move, because of the fire-bombing. Not to mention the people who were lost.”

But this great loss sparked ideas for the new work. “It’s a tremendous loss, a financial loss, the people who were lost, there’s a loss of community, a cultural loss. From my selfish point of view, I don’t have access to this culture, this language, and so on, these things were taken from me. On the other hand, it gives me a blank slate to imagine what it might have been like, and in a sense this piece is a kind of an act of imagination, an example of that.”

The last time Rolfe travelled was to Halifax to collaborate with Dalhousie University’s Fountain School of Performing Arts, and his “fingers are crossed,” that he’ll be able to attend October’s premiere. After that, he can’t wait to hear more live music and resume travelling, and plans to visit Berlin again to collaborate with a cousin “who is writing poems about some of the relatives who didn’t survive.”

During the pandemic, Rolfe has become even more aware of the importance of live music, composing and recording songs and singing duets with his composer wife, Juliet Palmer.

“Singing is a joy....I was writing for myself. So I had to provide the performer and the audience myself. That was a good lesson to learn, I sort of knew it already, but it was a very good lesson for me. You realize how much we do as composers depends on the performer and on the audience. It’s a three-way equation. Without the other two, it was much harder...In some ways you have it over the Internet, but it’s not the same. Live music is very special, but you don’t realize how special until it’s gone.” 🎵

*Peggy Walt is a recipient of the AJC’s Abraham Leventhal Memorial Scholarship and completing an MFA in Creative Nonfiction at King’s University.*

Ticket information: [www.vocalypse.ca](http://www.vocalypse.ca)  
or [www.vocalypse.ca/events/bingen-rolfe-project](http://www.vocalypse.ca/events/bingen-rolfe-project)

**SEND A Partnership2Gether GIFT CARD TO CELEBRATE!**  
**HELP SUPPORT OUR VALUABLE PROJECTS IN NORTHERN ISRAEL**

Contact Naomi Rosenfeld, executive director: 902-422-7493 | [executivedirector@theajc.ca](mailto:executivedirector@theajc.ca)