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Channeling Leonard Bernstein: A Musical Response to Violence

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Lucas Richman

His prolific musical output has won awards and spanned every conceivable genre. He has produced orchestral compositions, chamber and choral works, collaborated with film composers and seen his work performed by more than 200 orchestras across the country. But despite repeated urgings by friends over the years to tackle a symphony, Lucas Richman hesitated.

“It takes a lot of ego to write a piece that compels people to sit in a seat and listen for 35 minutes or, in the case of Mahler, for an hour and a half,” said Richman, a Los Angeles native who is also the music director at the Bangor Symphony Orchestra in Maine. “While I don’t doubt my ability as a composer, I wanted to make sure I had something compelling to say.”

That hesitation ended three years ago. Richman’s first symphony — the 35-minute “This Is Our Reply” — will be part of the “Friendship & Harmony” concert, a collaboration between the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony (LAJS) and the Los Angeles Korean-American Musicians’ Association Philharmonic on Aug. 17 at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. The piece’s title indicates that, indeed, Richman has a significant

subject.

The man who helped give Richman something to say was himself a celebrated composer as well as a former teacher: Leonard Bernstein, with whom Richman had studied during the last five years of his life. Bernstein's message resonated not only with Richman but with the mission of LAJS and with a key tenet of Jewish liturgy.

In 1963, two days after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Bernstein delivered a speech at the United Jewish Appeal of Greater New York's fundraising event, a speech that has since been titled "An Artist's Response to Violence." "This will be our reply to violence," Bernstein said, "to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before."

With America celebrating Bernstein's centenary in 2018, Richman reflected on Bernstein's words, on the concept of tikkun olam and — at various points — on the fact that the world is still broken. With the permission of the Leonard Bernstein Office, Richman created "This Is Our Reply," a symphony in three movements for chorus and orchestra.

In an acknowledgment to the Bernstein quote, the three movements of "Reply" are "Intensity," "Beauty" and "Devotion" and the final movement contains an original poem from the Jewish liturgy around the subject of tikkun olam.

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— Lucas Richman

"I cast the piece in those three movements — 'Intensity,' 'Beauty' and 'Devotion' — and then promptly discarded just about every bit of music I tried to write to fill those parameters," Richman said. "It became clear to me that I needed to focus on third movement, that devotion that would be the ultimate message of the piece and form that movement. All the melodic material is derived from that and that forms the basis of the first and second movements."

Unlike the event that prompted Bernstein's quote, Richman said there was no specific incident that inspired "Reply," although there have been numerous acts of violence over the nearly three years he has been working on the symphony.

"Every time something tragic would happen or another mass shooting would occur, it certainly underlined my drive to complete this piece and make it available for people to play and hear," he said.

"Reply" was co-commissioned by the Oak Ridge Symphony in Tennessee, the Bemidji Symphony Orchestra in Minnesota and LAJS. LAJS was a natural creative partner, as Richman has worked with the symphony and Artistic Director Noreen Green practically since the orchestra's founding.

In 2016, LAJS performed Richman's "In the Day When I Cried Out," a gospel-style work based on the psalms of David and the cry for religious freedom as part of a Passover concert at the American Jewish University's Gindi Auditorium. The LAJS has also performed several of Richman's arrangements of traditional Jewish and Israeli songs.

"He has a very Jewish soul — neshamah — which always comes out in his music, whether it's meant to be Jewish or not," Green said of Richman. "Every time we work together, I'm always impressed with the depth of his arrangements in addition to the wonderful musicality and the attention to detail, which he always puts into everything he does, whether it's conducting, composing or writing."

The timing of bringing "This Is Our Reply" to the Disney Concert Hall was particularly fortuitous. A couple of years ago, the Los Angeles Korean-American Musicians' Association approached Green about participating in the 2018 "Friendship & Harmony" concert. The orchestra was not available, and Green targeted the 2019 event. In the interim, Richman approached her to be part of the "Reply" commissioning consortium.

Not only did she join the commission, Green knew instantly that "Reply" would be an ideal piece for "Friendship & Harmony."

"The mission of the Korean-American Musicians' Association is to heal the world through music," Green said. "It was like synergy with 'This Is Our Reply' being based on tikkun olam. [For the 2019 concert], they are doing a piece about Korean ideology and the beauty of the land, and at the end, we all sing together on Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy,' which is all about brotherhood."

Richman also embraces the harmonic components of his work and of the evening's program. Raised in Southern California in a "not very Conservative" Jewish upbringing, the composer says he now often explores his cultural heritage through his work. Richman calls "This Is Our Reply" "a touchstone along my path of becoming more and more aware of my Judaic background."

That said, the composer emphasizes that the piece is for people of all backgrounds.

"The themes are very universal," he said. "In the same way that 'Fiddler on the Roof' had a universal theme of tradition played to sold-out audiences in Japan and to many diverse cultures, I hope that this piece will also be able to cross all cultural lines to unite people in a common quest for peace."

The "Friendship & Harmony" concert will take place at 8 p.m. Aug. 17 at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. info@lajs.org, (818) 646-2844.