

The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony

Artistic Director
Noreen Green

ISRAEL RESONATES
by Rabbi Baruch Cohn

Sunday the 25th was a day to hear sounds. Two contrasting aural experiences, in fact. Both drew large numbers. Both concerned Israel. Neither one was political. Both were musical. That morning I was one of an estimated 1500 Jews in Pan Pacific Park for a prayer meeting on behalf of Israel. All ages were there -- babies in strollers, patriarchs with canes. We stood under the trees, or out in the open sun, and responded to an unseen but clearly amplified cantor chanting the Psalms of David. "May G-d answer you on the day of trouble," he sang. And we echoed him, minor key, augmented intervals, with a flourish and a wail -- a cappella, very European, very Ashkenazi.

"They said 'come, let us cut them off from nationhood, so the name of Israel will be not be remembered.'" More chanting, more echoing. And finally came the declaration of faith, "Shema Yisroel" and a major key of hope took over. That was event #1.

Event #2 took place that evening at Sinai Temple. With some 500 others, I crowded in to hear the L.A. Jewish Symphony "Celebrate Israel's Music." Noreen Green conducted the orchestra in a unique and stirring program, featuring the work of five contemporary Israeli composers. Unlike the morning gathering, this performance drew heavily on the Sephardic/Mediterranean sound.

Ariel Davydov's "Exodus" is a short dramatic overture which takes a Passover melody from Bukhara and "civilizes" it with symphonic instrumentation and harmony.

Moshe Rasnik's "Kadam (East Wind)" has a remarkably descriptive quality. The listener can almost see the clouds begin to churn and threaten as the woodwinds and the wood block feed the theme to the strings. Then agitation builds. A high-pitched woodwind passage signals the animals fleeing, as the storm begins -- first in the low strings, then whirling through the orchestra, until a solo violin sings the "lament of destruction." The storm is over. This was Rasnik's first American performance. Look for him to get more recognition.

The first half of the concert concluded with the "Israel Suite" by Noan Sheriff. A succession of Hebrew songs -- old but still sung -- set in simple and effective orchestral arrangements, this song suite was not sung but danced. Danced by guest artist Or Nili Azulay -- easily the most impressive figure of the evening. A statuesque brunette who could be lithe and majestic at the same time, she used the stage and the music with all the skill and flare she expressed with her long purple gown, her long dark hair, the long arms with the dancing fingers, and the great lace scarf. Combining interpretive movements with hora and flamenco, she fascinated the audience. Her unaccompanied solo just before the last movement of the suite was spectacular.

Sheriff, the only composer not present at the concert, also knows Jewish audiences. He presented each of the songs in his suite by stating the melody right away -- until he came to the last one, the favorite hora folk tune "Nigun Zialik." Here he held back the main theme, opening with a bridge, then a variation, and gradually eased into the familiar first eight bars. Immediately the delighted audience fell into rhythmic clapping, loud enough to rival the orchestra.

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music review(s)

The second half consisted of Benjamin Yusupov's "Symphony #1" and "Sephardic Songs of Exile" by Yuval Ron.

Yusupov, who immigrated to Israel from his native Tajikistan in 1990, based his work on "maknot" -- the Mideastern musical modes which give that folk music its distinctive character. Rather than soften them with a symphonic treatment, he adapts the symphonic instruments to the modes. Quarter-tone intervals, dissonances, Oriental effects -- they're all there, and the LAJS produced them masterfully. Noreen Green and the orchestra have spent a good deal of time introducing the Sephardic sound to students around Los Angeles, and they know how to make these sounds and how to do it artistically. Yusupov's symphony builds from isolated Oriental effects, through passages of dissonances and heavy rhythm to a dramatic climax that brought the audience out of the seats. Lea Steffens' incredible clarinet solo was a highlight of that climax.

Yuval Ron's oud -- an Eastern madolin-like instrument -- led the guest group for the finale. Vocalist Maya Haddi started quietly -- almost inaudible over the instruments -- but soon picked up volume and emotion and exhibited an exciting voice. Jamie Fapish on the hand drum gave the "Sephardic Songs" a characteristic ring. And dancer Oz Nili Azulay returned, in red and black this time.

For me, an additional payoff came from a low-register theme on the oud. It was nearly identical with one of the repeated phrases I had responded to that morning from the tenor voice of the Ashkenazi cantor. Different feeling, different text, same melody. There is Jewish unity after all.

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