

# Jewish Music is Alive and Well

By Rabbi Baruch Cohn

**L**OS ANGELES — Two events on Sunday August 26th proved the power and progress of Jewish music in the Los Angeles community. One was a small gathering in a private home that featured performances by violinists Roberto Cani and Phillip Levy who brought instrumental excellence to a variety of works (including some by Prokofiev which they called "shetl music!") and the brilliant tenor of expert young Israeli Hazan Nati Baram, all for the benefit of the arts program at Harkham Hillel Academy. Talent like theirs honors the Jewish sound.

The second event was a gala concert at the Ford Theater celebrating the 18th birthday of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony. Titled "Chai Lights," the program justifiably reflected the personal taste of conductor and artistic director Dr. Noreen Green. Why is her preference important? Very simple. A building contractor can take a blueprint and put up a perfectly solid structure even if he personally doesn't like the design.

*But an artist must relate to the*

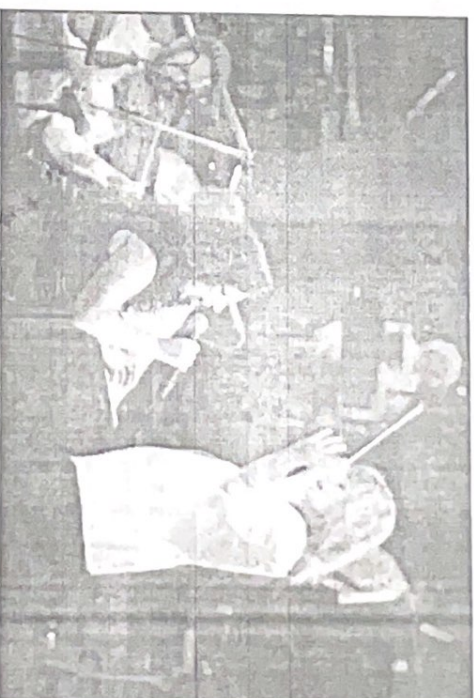
ic Dance" by Abraham Ellstein (who, as Noreen Green reminded us, was one of the Big Four composers for the Yiddish theater) featured some wonderful clarinet solos by Zinovy Goro, also one of the original LAJS members. With both Goro and Kashper as stars, they attracted a sizeable group of Russian speaking audience members. They were not disappointed. Can't beat the heimish quality of a good klezmer clarinet. And Ellstein provides plenty of augmented seconds for the soloist to play around with. Whether it was in the Richard Hayman arrangement or the original score, we also heard some dissonances that Ellstein never allowed himself in his Second Avenue music.

Lucas Richman's "Prayer and Freylach" featured first cellist Barry Gold who gave an outstanding performance in both movements. Very different in their feeling, the "Prayer" score offered a sonorous vehicle for Gold's eloquent tone, while "Freylach" demanded the virtuoso technique that he executed with great verve — never losing that full rich sound. A combina-

bel out dialog with Glaser as they perform his "Kol Barnidbar Medley" retelling stories from the Torah to a modern beat. Aided by solo saxophonist Michael Lington, they performed the Glaser song "Unbreakable Soul," and sang of Jerusalem to an urgent handclapping jazz rhythm. Purists would not call this Jewish music. But the kids dig it! It even makes their learning fun. From an audience viewpoint, however, there was one problem. Musical balance was lacking in places, with the instruments drowning out the voices, so some lyrics got lost.

A mainstay of the symphony, pianist Chris Hardin orchestrated these songs, and also another Glaser composition "Lift My Eyes." Duetting with Glaser on the latter was Ilysia Pierce who also soloed on "Where is it Written" from the Barbara Streisand film "Yentl." Occasionally hampered with tremolo, she sang with great feeling and expressed it physically as well as vocally.

Final solo of the evening was the cantorial classic "V'Yinshalayim Ircho" — "To



(L to R) Stage performer and cantor at the Temple of the Arts Ilysia Pierce with acclaimed conductor of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony Dr. Noreen Green. Credit: Guy Madmoni

tration — and made each phrase and each word meaningful. As a baritone, his voice is heavier than those we used to hear doing this number on records — men like Rosenblatt or Koussevitsky who were tenors. But the effect was authentic nonetheless.

The finale "As You Walk with Me/Im Yirtze Hashem" by Sharon Farber with Hebrew lyrics by Danny Israeli and English by

their way home. That is, until they could get out of the Ford Theater parking lot...but even klezmer music can't change that.

Combining the new and the old, the memory melodies of Europe, the current beat of Israel and a few jazz chords from Broadway, we took with us an impression of the direction and vitality of Jewish music in this and many other communities. Personally,

it's like to hear this morning's



can take a manuscript and put up a perfectly solid structure even if he personally doesn't like the design. But an artist must relate to the material on a gut level, otherwise the performance will not work. Noreen Green assembled this fine group of musicians to "perform works of distinction that explore Jewish culture, heritage and experience." Her *Chai Lights* program sought to illustrate how that mission is being achieved.

The first half of the concert featured compositions that draw on Jewish life in Europe. Opening Simon Sargon's "Reb Mendele" suite for violin and orchestra, concertmaster Mark Kashper led off with a solo cadenza and then proceeded to trade themes with the orchestra in the "Supplication" movement. "Lullaby" followed sweetly, and "Wedding Dance" concluded the suite with joyous vigor. Kashper, LAJS concertmaster since its inception, brings the musical training from his native Leningrad and Moscow conservatories to these numbers, as he does to his work with the L.A. Philharmonic. He originally performed "Reb Mendele" in 1998, in the presence of the composer who then invited him to record the composition. In this wedding dance, as in much of the first part of the concert, tempo is even more important than melody or harmony. These composers and performers, steeped in the old-country musical style, take the good old Russian speed-up and give it a sophisticated treatment that can be quite exciting.

Following numbers carried the folk theme through. "Hasid-

white "Treylach" demanded the virtuoso technique that he executed with great verve — never losing that full rich sound. A combination like that is rare.

At this point in the program Noreen introduced Dr. Richard Merkin, president of the LAJS board, whom she called the founder of the symphony. The doctor mounted the stage modestly and spoke just a few words. The working president of LAJS, Dr. Ian Drew, did not face the audience at all, except for the significant page he wrote about the orchestra in the program. The entire thrust of this group is music, not vanity.

Winding up the first half of the program, we heard the U.S. premiere of "Klezmpolitan Suite" by Niki Reiser. Again Zinovo Goro and Mark Kashper brought great color to this number, joined by flutist David Shostac and pianist Chris Hardin. Although Reiser describes the suite as dramatizing the expulsion of Sephardic Jewry and its acceptance in Ashkenazi Europe, this reviewer listened in vain for any identifiable Sephardic themes. The audience did not seem to miss them, however. With all that klezmer sound to clap to, who cared?

The second half of the concert featured Sam Glaser, a particularly original and popular voice on today's Jewish music scene. Joining him was the newly formed Jewish Community Children's Choir, one very positive result of the educational work of LAJS. Drawn from schools all over Los Angeles, these 40 youngsters sing with gusto and

vocally.

Final solo of the evening was the cantorial classic "V'Yinshalayim Ircho" — "To Jerusalem Your city" — also composed by Ellstein, and sung by cantor Nathan Lam, to an orchestration by composer Michael Isaacson. Lam performed with emmesse kavanah — true concern

of the direction and vitality of Jewish music in this and many other communities. Personally, I'd like to hear this morning's violinists and saxman Livingston. It drew a standing ovation, and prompted an encore of all-out klezmer proportions, leaving the full-house audience to dance



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