

## Noreen Green



Photos courtesy of Noreen Green

## I hear a symphony

by Nancy H. Kleinbaum

**W**hen Noreen Green picks up her baton, the world comes alive with beautiful music. Whether in Los Angeles, where she formed the first ever Jewish Symphony Orchestra, or in Tel Aviv, where she incorporated a taste of Hollywood's strong Jewish musical film history into a symphonic concert entitled "Cinema Judaica, Film Music with Jewish Themes," this beautiful young music scholar has established broad boundaries and created personal interpretations of some of the Jewish world's newest, most enduring and best known Jewish music.

Her ambitious and distinctive love affair with music began when she was five years old in a modest home in Sherman Oaks, California. Her mother, a music lover, taught her to read music before words and encouraged her to believe that girls could do anything boys could.

By high school, she was already conducting choral groups. She studied music as an undergraduate at the University of the Pacific and received a Master's of Music degree in Choral Conducting, under the well-known conductor John Alexander at California State University, Northridge, and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Choral Music from the University of Southern California. She met her husband, Dr. Ian Drew, a physician and

émigré from South Africa, while studying for her doctorate.

From 1981 to 1990, Green was the conductor of the American Jewish Choral Society, an ensemble that comprised a large proportion of Holocaust survivors and where she programmed an eclectic variety of Yiddish, Hebrew and Ladino choral works. From 1986 to 1992, she was an assistant professor at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), where she conducted the Woman's Chorale and the Chamber Singers, and served as Director for CSUN Musical Theater productions. In the summer of 1991, she was selected as a conducting fellow for the Oregon Bach Festival, where she worked under the baton of Helmuth Rilling.

**W**hen she first left her Jewish circle of friends in the San Fernando Valley to go to college in northern California, she recalls feeling like a member of a minority for the very first time. "Up until then, I had been in a safe world mostly confined to the Los Angeles Jewish community. College was different. It was not what I expected, going from a sheltered environment into the real world."

It was at USC where she recalls discovering a passion for Jewish music. Her doctoral treatise specialized in the works of David



Nowakowsky, a little known 20th century composer from Odessa in the Ukraine. Much of Nowakowsky's music was feared lost in the Holocaust. As it turned out, the scores of his music were buried in a farm in Vichy, France and later unearthed and brought to America, becoming the basis of Green's doctoral treatise.

"After college I taught music at a Catholic high school for a couple of years," she recalls. "When I got the opportunity to be the music director at a synagogue, it seemed as if my life's ambition started to fall into place."

**H**er eyes twinkle as she smiles when she speaks of her husband, Ian Drew, whom she met at a Jewish singles mixer!

"It can happen!" she laughs. "I was his fantasy. I was Jewish and he had always envisioned marrying someone Jewish who was on the stage. I was that Jewish fantasy!"

The couple was married in May 1992 and Green stopped working in the Los Angeles area and went to California State at Bakersfield where her husband's medical clinic was located.

"When we got married, I was teaching at the university level. My husband wanted us to have a freer existence. He encouraged me to leave teaching and go into the professional arena," she says.

"I was alone and miserable in Bakersfield," she confesses. But in the summer of 1993, she won a scholarship to the coveted Aspen Music Festival. "For two glorious months high up in the mountains of Colorado I conducted, learning the art of orchestral music," she recalls.

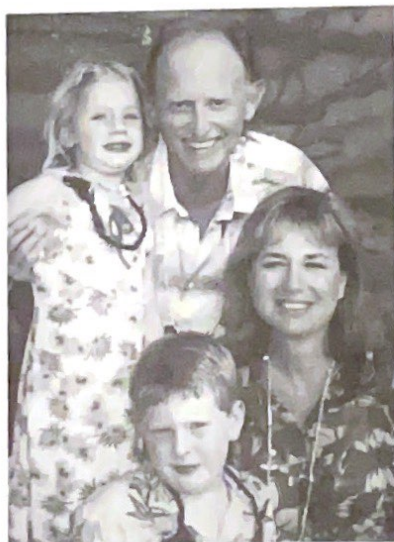
"As part of the curriculum, I had to arrange a concert with the students. I decided to put on a Jewish music concert at the Aspen Jewish Center. There were 35 students involved. The concept was unheard of," she recalls, "but it was a smashing success! It seemed as if the whole town came. We had to turn people away!"

The event proved to be not only the turning point of her career, but the beginning of an innovation never before initiated by a woman.



Los Angeles Jewish Symphony.

"Murry Sidlin, who is currently the Director of the Oregon Symphony Orchestra, was my conducting teacher at the Aspen Music School. After the success of that concert, Murry told me that I should return to Los Angeles and start a Jewish Symphony Orchestra. It was an incredible idea! He reminded me that there were orchestras all over L.A. and that I had to find a way to carve out my own special niche. An orchestra devoted to Jewish repertoire was a perfect match for my talent and passion.



Dr. Ian Drew, Noreen Green, Hannah and Aaron.

"Ian loved the idea. He lives for mitzvot and tzedaka. To have us start an orchestra with the mission of performing music on the Jewish experience and contribute to Judaism and the Los Angeles community, was an incredible way to enrich our lives by enriching the lives of others," she says with enthusiasm.

"Being in Los Angeles is an added bonus. We have a totally professional orchestra composed of musicians some of whom are players also in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, as well as professional musicians who work in film studios. It is a perfect location.

"As a first step I approached Ian's business friend, Dr. Richard Merkin, for help with seed money. For our first three years the orchestra was funded by just us. Our debut concert was in April 1994. All the monies I earned from my work as a choral director and teacher I donated to the LAJS. This is a total labor of love," she says humbly.

Now entering its ninth season, the Jewish Symphony has a distinguished 26-member Board of Directors that helps to raise money through private and corporate donations. The LAJS also boasts a very extensive education department funded by grants.

"I am not a business person. With Ian's advice and help we now have an administrative staff of six," she explains. Dr. Merkin is Founder of the Symphony and Ian Dr. Drew serves as president.

**T**he woman behind the music is now the energetic mother of two 5 year olds, Aaron, and Hannah, her adopted daughter from the Ukraine. Green points out that before motherhood she had 18 hours a day to focus on the Symphony. "Now I'm lucky if I have eight. It's difficult to do both well, but I seem to find a balance."

She explains that her husband was anxious to have a second child, because he was an only child and his own mother was an orphan. "I had Aaron, an infant and childbirth was something I didn't especially want to go through again," she admits.



They decided to look into adoption and made inquiries as to opportunities available in the Ukraine.

"I had previously conducted in Odessa, 40 kilometers from where my grandmother lived in Kishinev. When I walked down the street there, I could see people who looked like my own family.

"I told Ian I wanted to adopt a child from the Ukraine. When you go back to see the life there, everything is so hard that you can't help but have an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for the courage that our grandparents showed when they boarded the boats to America. In a strange way I felt it was like I was adopting my own grandmother! Both Ian's and my heritage are from Eastern Europe.

"Hannah was born in Zaporozhye, Ukraine. We adopted her when she was 11 months old. Aaron was 14 months old at the time, so it's like having twins! At first Aaron rebelled and Hannah was terrified of the dog," she says of Sheba, whom Green refers to as "my first baby."

"Now the children are very close and the best of friends. Sounding like a typical mother, Green recalls the children's graduation from nursery school. "Hannah sparkled, she was so excited," she smiles. "Both children play the piano and Aaron is a natural actor. He sang along with the Orchestra when we played 'Sevivon, Sov, Sov, Sov.' They will both be in kindergarten this year at Valley Beth Shalom School in Encino, California, where Green is also the music director.

**T**he Los Angeles Jewish Symphony is actively engaged in promoting educational outreach programs for both adults and school age children. Two years ago, the Symphony went to the Los Angeles Jewish Home for the Aging with an innovative program to use traditional music to help Jewish seniors reconnect with their heritage. When Symphony member Beth Elliott played the well-known Jewish wedding songs on her viola, it struck a chord for a 79-year old former cantor suffering from Alzheimer's Disease.



Photos courtesy of Nannan Green

As the *Los Angeles Times* reported at the time, "A smile creased his face, and in a clear, steady voice, he began to sing. Elliott extended her hand, he took it and they danced."

Elliott and bassoonist Leslie Lashinsky, also a member of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, led the workshop that was dedicated to explore Jewish melodies, with hopes of using the music as a tool to help awaken memories of the Home's residents.

"Not all of the participants suffer from dementia, but many of them have repressed memories of childhood, weddings, bar mitzvahs and holidays that are reawakened by familiar tunes," Green explains.

The project, called "Linking our Heritage: Sephardic and Ashkenasic Music of Life Cycle Events," is similar to one the Orchestra will have in place in Jewish day schools in 2003. It is a prototype for what is hoped will become a nationwide multi-generational effort to use music to enrich the links between the young and the elderly.

A different educational outreach curriculum is presented by the LAJS to more than 800 fourth-grade students in Jewish day and public schools across Southern California. In this program, four teaching artists from the LAJS go into the schools where they teach Sephardic compositions as they relate to Sephardic Jewish history and culture. This Sephardic music program was initiated with a grant from the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles

and has been funded by the Maurice Amado Foundation for the past five years.

In addition the students learn about elements of orchestral music. Green says that the educational programs are equally important as the concerts because they teach the language of music in the context of different aspects of Jewish history. Most importantly, she smiles, the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony is building audiences for the future!

Elizabeth Gilbert, a flutist, is education director of the LAJS. She designed the outreach programs which also include an introduction to the Ladino language spoken by Sephardic Jews. For the Los Angeles public schools the program is also a link with the large Hispanic population of the city.

"We didn't just want to perform concerts in schools," Green explains. "We wanted them to learn about their culture and then experience the music. That approach is consistent with the mission of our orchestra."

**A**nother important aspect of this unique organization is its focus on the music of the Holocaust, which has its origins in Green's personal interest in the music of David Nowakowsky. Inspired by her research and the remarkable journey of the manuscripts through the Second World War, she served as West Coast Music Director of the David Nowakowsky Foundation from 1992-1998, presenting an annual concert, and editing several of his manuscripts, ten of which are published.



"In the Holocaust we lost a lot of music, but even some of that music is resurfacing," Green told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Nowakowsky's music, although written prior to the Holocaust, was placed on Hitler's infamous "Hit List" of music and musicians destined for a museum of the "extinct race." Green decided to research other music that was closely linked to the Holocaust experience or that might have been written during the Holocaust and bring these compositions to the stage.

"In the last 50 years, there has been an explosion of Jewish composers finally having the opportunity to look at their Jewish roots and exploring that and commenting on it in music."

One such concert was entitled "From Exile to Emigrant" and featured Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*, a dramatic serial piece from 1947; Franz Waxman's romantic score for the 1960 film, *The Story of Ruth* and "The Dachau Lied" by Lucas Richman based on a poignant piece by Herbert Zipper. Zipper, who died in 1997, was a concentration camp survivor and dynamic Los Angeles personality. The program also included *Song of Songs* by one-time UCLA-based composer Lucas Foss.

Described as "a persistent, driven, musical archeologist," Green has traveled to Russia, Europe, Israel and throughout the United States seeking new and old Jewish music.

"I like that description because I actually feel like that, digging through libraries and scores and trying to uncover or rekindle works that have had little performance or have never even been heard!"

"Through my efforts I think that the LAJS has excelled more than any other ensemble in uncovering dormant treasure troves of Jewish music and showcasing compositions that have seldom been presented as part of the standard concert repertoire. As an example, I think the *Piano Concertino* by Wladyslaw Sepilman that was written in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940 is a work that is up there with Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

"Roman Polansky has now made *The*

*Pianist*, a book based on Sepilman's life into a feature film. The film won the top prize at the coveted Cannes Film Festival in 2002 and opens in the United States in December 2002. It is a feather in our cap that the LAJS presented the world premiere of this work in April of 2001. It's an example of what we do best."

Green has also presented the works of other Holocaust-era Jews. "I think it's important when I play the music of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco for people to know that he was a Jew and had to leave Florence for the United States because of the Holocaust. That puts a whole different



With Estelle Getty.

light on the music and his life.

Another example is the composer Darius Milhaud. The first line of his biography begins, 'I am a Frenchman from Provence and of the Jewish faith.' Most people know that Aaron Copland and George Gershwin were Jewish, but don't realize how much of their music comes out of their Jewishness."

She observes "how much music has been written by Jewish composers or on Jewish themes for symphony that aren't played by the standard orchestras. This became a passion in my life, to bring these unperformed works to the stage."

Green also highlights the music of local Angelinos. In 1999, the Symphony celebrated its 5th anniversary with a special concert, "The Light of Helfman: Generations of Music from the Brandeis-Bardin Institute." That concert was a tribute to influential educator and composer Max Helfman, who founded the

summer music program at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in Simi Valley, California some 50 years ago and who helped steer many young Jewish musicians into successful professional careers. The concert featured Helfman's Yiddish version of Handel's seasonal classic, *Judas Maccabeus*, along with several other works by composers whom Helfman mentored and guided into composing careers.

The success and continued accomplishments of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony is a direct result of Green's passionate devotion to the mission of the orchestra. Phil Blazer, an L.A. radio and TV host who has included the LAJS in his annual Blazer Communications production of Jewish music at the Greek Theater in L.A., observes that the Symphony is "a great step forward for Jewish music. It is all because Noreen has taken this to be her commitment to life."

In a compliment to the success that the orchestra has attained, Blazer attributes the increased interest in Jewish music directly to the work of Green and the LAJS.

"By bringing a high level of sophistication to Jewish music, old and new, they have put Los Angeles at the forefront of a renewed interest in Jewish music, by bringing to our community a cross-cultural array of folk, liturgical, and classical compositions from around the world."

One reason, for this renewed interest, Green believes, is that music is a way for Jews to reflect on their identity, history and culture in an environment free of the written word or the dictates of religion. Ironically this may be the very impetus that leads them back to their religious beliefs.

"The eclectic nature of our repertoire is really a reflection of my own personality," she explains. "Choosing repertoire is subjective and I perform music that resonates in some way with me as well as the mission of the Symphony. As our audiences have come to know over the last eight years, I like all kinds of music from classical to jazz to Broadway to rock 'n' roll. Perhaps that's why they keep coming back for more."



## "Women talk about striving to be self-actualized. I am so grateful to have this in my life. I do this for me. It fills my soul."

To date, Green has premiered dozens of works by European, Russian, Canadian, Argentinean and Israeli composers. Other themes have centered on Jewish contributions to Broadway Theater, Hollywood films and Jewish liturgies. Works have also included non-Jewish composers working with Jewish themes, such as Dmitri Shostakovich's *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, as well as new works by aspiring Jewish composers that highlight the Jewish experience through music or song.

A feature of each performance given by the Symphony is that Green always provides her own educational commentary for her audiences. "I believe it is important for the audience to understand what they are about to hear; to go from a passive listening experience to an active one," she says. "I am constantly told how much the vignettes I present before each piece enriches their experience and makes the music more accessible and meaningful. Together with the music, the presentations make for a wonderful evening of pure enjoyment."

In keeping with her role as music archeologist, Green recalls the story of her incredible discovery of the *Talmud Symphony* by composer Jacobo Ficher.

"I was in Philadelphia where I happened to meet the son of the composer. He related to me that his father was Jacobo Ficher and how he had preserved all his music. He offered to send me the *Talmud Symphony*! I couldn't believe it. What a treasure to have unearthed and brought to the world."

Her enthusiasm is contagious as she describes the music and how its melody binds Jews over large distances in time and space.

"The composition was written in three sketches inspired by the Talmud. As I was studying the music at home, I got to the theme of the third movement and I recognized in the melody the music that you hear every Rosh Hashanah. Sitting at my piano

in Brentwood, California, I am reading music that was written in Argentina, where Ficher had immigrated to from Odessa, and realized that the melody was the evening *niggun* that my choir sings every year at the High Holidays!

"I was speechless! When I tell the story, I am again amazed at the connectivity that is to be found in music. Music has the ability to connect all of us; it is what binds us and connects our people. What I'm doing I believe is very important. I am grateful every day for the gift I was given to follow this path."

Green's wholehearted commitment to the development of the LAJS is evident in the scope of work that it performs. The Symphony's repertoire, from its inception in 1994 to 2002, goes from Yefim Adler's *Three Pieces for Orchestra* to Aaron Zigman's *Rabin*, a total of 147 symphonic pieces for orchestra!

In addition, she has prepared holiday-themed concerts for Hanukkah, Passover, Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom HaShoah. A "Women of Valor Concert," featuring works by Jewish women composers, including the *Women of Valor Oratorio* which was commissioned by the Jewish Symphony Orchestra and sponsored by Hadassah of Southern California, premiered at UCLA's Royce Hall in April 2000.

Composed by Dr. Andrea Clearfield, a friend of Green's from the Aspen Music Festival, the 60-minute work is a combination of biblical text, contemporary poetry and music, focusing on ten women in the Bible and taken from a song in Proverbs: 3 in which men extol the virtues of their wives. Actress Valerie Harper narrated the intricately woven work.

In the 2001-2002 Season, Green presented Ernst Toch's *Cantata of the Bitter Herbs*, with narration by Leonard Nimoy. This season, with Nimoy's backing, the LAJS is programming a

Jewish Symphony Chamber Series.

"To grow, I must expand the Symphony's profile. Every program has a theme. This season we celebrated music by Israeli composers by performing music that I researched when I was in Israel two years ago.

"At that time, three of my soloists and I traveled to Israel and performed a concert there as part of the Tel Aviv-LA Partnership, a program of the Jewish Federation. The Partnership wanted me to bring a piece of L.A. to Israel and I did. We performed the famous film music of Hollywood written on Jewish themes. It was wonderful."

Looking back over her eight years with her LAJS, Dr. Green confesses that she had no idea what a powerful success story it would become.

"When you start something, you don't know if it's going to strike a chord. It is a new experience, a scary one, too. If you have an idea and you set it in motion, you can't be sure of the outcome," she says.

"I couldn't foresee eight years ago where we would be today. Women talk about striving to be self-actualized. I am so grateful to have this in my life. I do this for me. It fills my soul. As I look to the future, I'd like to take this body of repertoire and bring it to communities across the nation."

Asked if it was different to conduct Jewish versus non-Jewish music, Green maintains strongly that, for her, it is.

"When conducting music that represents something Jewish, I feel a connection between myself, the composer and the audience. It is like being in a circle. It is like being in love. It is energizing, satisfying, fulfilling, and exhilarating all at once." [Lifestyle]

For information on the LAJS the website address is [lajewishsymphony.com](http://lajewishsymphony.com).

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