

## The Arts

# Notes From a Jewish Muse

*From film scores to folk tunes, classical to comedic oratorios, what binds this wide-ranging orchestra together is its Jewishness.*

By **Gary Libman**

As she pored over the score for Kurt Weill's almost forgotten oratorio, *The Eternal Road*, Noreen Green discovered that the composer had interwoven a Kol Nidre melody. "It bowled me over," recalls Green, founder and conductor of The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony. "When...something pops out at me that is so embedded in our history and culture, it stirs up all the emotions of a Jew. I can't explain it...it makes me connected to every Jew in the world." Green is inspiring many such connections through the only orchestra in the world outside Israel dedicated to performing works composed by Jews or inspired by Jewish motifs.

The LAJS's repertoire expresses the breadth and richness of music—from centuries-old hymns to modern and even new pieces—that reflects Jewish heritage. When the orchestra opened its seventh season on December 3, 2000 at the University Synagogue in Los Angeles, the backdrop was Torah scrolls wrapped in multicolored covers, decorated with bright, simple Hebrew letters. The highlight was the music honoring the one-hundredth birthdays of composers Weill and Aaron Copland.

On this night the sounds of German cabaret and syncopated rhythm filled the hall. The jazz-inspired music of Copland was apparent in his *Music for the Theater*; "Vit-ebsk," a violin, cello and piano trio, evinced a strong East European influence; and the arrangements of "Simple Gift" and "Zion's Walls" from his *Old American Songs* was pure Americana with its underlying folk rhythms.

Green's decision to honor German-born Weill with excerpts from his *Eternal Road* was inspired. After all, Weill, the son of a cantor, had to flee his native land in 1933; the oratorio is set in a synagogue where Jews take refuge from a pogrom. Initially hesitant to reproduce the work, created with Franz Werfel and first staged in 1937, Green flew to see a Brooklyn production and was convinced. She enlisted actor Dick Van Patten to read a narration she had composed for the piece.

But on any other evening the repertoire could have as easily included Sefardic melodies, Dimitri Shostakovich's song cycle on Yiddish poetry, show tunes or film scores as



**Breaking Sound Barriers** Green is one of the few women conductors who has created her own orchestra.

COURTESY OF THE LAJS/COURTIS DAHL STUDIO

## Rekindling interest in worthwhile compositions, like Weill's *The Eternal Road*, is one of The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony's goals.

well as classical or modern symphonies—and it has.

With such a range, says concertmaster Mark Kashper, the orchestra doesn't have one distinctive sound. "And I think that's the beauty of it," he explains. "Because Jewish music—there is so much of it and there is such great diversity that it's never boring. It's always something new."

**I**N MAY 2000, the LAJS traveled to Israel to perform *Cinema Judaica: Film Music With Jewish Themes* with the New Symphony Orchestra of the Samuel Rubín Israel Academy of Music of Tel-Aviv University. (*Cinema Judaica II* will open next month at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles.) The orchestra's popular annual concert at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles has included stars like Marvin Hamlisch, Pat Boone and Theodore Bikel.

More than 500 showed up for the December concert. Depending on the repertoire, the energetic 42-year-old Green works with 40 to 65 musicians. Kashper and several other players are from the Los Angeles Philharmonic, but the group also includes volunteer and student musicians. The nonprofit LAJS performs at least three full orchestra concerts each season as well as numerous free-to-the-public mini-concerts and at community events.

As artistic director, Green, one of the few women to have created her own orchestra, has commissioned several new works, including *Grossinger's—The Last Resort*. The musical homage to the rags-to-riches life of Jenny Grossinger, who turned her family's failing farm into the most famous resort of its time and a Jewish

comic haven, featured *Seinfeld's* Estelle Harris and even opened, in proper Catskills tradition, with a comedy warm-up.

Then there's the 60-minute oratorio, *Women of Valor*, commissioned last year from the award-winning composer Andrea Clearfield for a concert sponsored by Hadassah Southern California. The work is based on a commentary likening each line of Proverbs 31, *Eishet Hayil*, to a biblical woman. Modern poetry and prose and tradition and biblical-inspired melodies are woven together to describe 10 of the women in the *midrash*.

A muted trumpet plays the role of a *shofar*, and Middle Eastern percussion instruments, like the *dumbek* and *rik*, are used to get an ancient feel. Contemporary voices are provided by authors like Ellen Frenkel, who wrote *The Five Books of Miriam*, and Marge Piercy, whose text from *Mars and Her Children* poignantly reveals the connection between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi:

*Show me a woman who does not dream  
a double, heart's twin, a sister  
of the mind in whose ear she can whisper,  
whose hair she can braid as her life  
twists its pleasure and pain and shame.*

*Women of Valor* sets to music the thoughts and emotions of such role models as Hannah, the first to pray silently to God (interpreted by an instrumental piece) and Miriam, who Clearfield says was the first conductor. "She led the women in celebratory song and dance after the crossing of the Red Sea," the composer explains. The section on Miriam is dedicated to Green.

The orchestra also benefits from its artistic director's reputation as a dedicated researcher, who ferrets out little-known compositions. "A National Public Radio interviewer said I was like an archeologist, uncovering and discovering works," Green says. "I liked her analogy because I feel like that. Digging through libraries and repertoires and trying to uncover or rekindle works that have had little performance or never been heard."

"I think the *Piano Concertino* by Wladyslaw Szpilman is up there with Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*."

Szpilman wrote the *Piano Concertino* in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1940; described by the *Boston Globe* as "jaunty and Gershwin-esque," the work will premiere in April at the Valley Beth Shalom Synagogue in Encino, California.

Green agrees with observers that the orchestra performs an educational function. "I think it's important when I play the music of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco," she says, "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 light on his music and his life. Another example is [Darius] Milhaud. The first line of his biography is 'I am from Provence and of the Jewish faith.' Most people know that Irving Berlin and George Gershwin are Jewish, but don't realize how much of their music comes out of their Jewishness."

To enrich a performance, Green introduces each work with some background. "Each...is like a mini-educational unit," she says. The music can also touch Jews who are unaffiliated with the community. "A connection

to a synagogue, religion or God scares a lot of people," Green observes. "Music is a nonthreatening way for people to identify with their Jewishness."

"I love sharing my knowledge or things that I've discovered," says Green, who has brought the orchestra to more than 4,000 students in music appreciation classes—including a Sefardic music program at 14 Los Angeles-area Jewish day schools—and recently began a program for senior citizens. "I love doing it one to one. The ultimate is in this performance situation. There's nothing like being in front of an audience and knowing everything is clicking."

"The orchestra fills a very significant vacuum," says Rabbi Allen I. Freehling of University Synagogue. "The music puts to rest any of the stereotypes Jews and non-Jews might have as they think about Jewish music, that our contributions consist only of klezmer, haunting East European melodies or songs written only for worship. The music is much more than that. The concerts give evidence that we are a part of, and not separate from, this world and all the realms of musical creativity."

Rekindling interest in Jewish music in this way was something Green never foresaw as a child. "It's totally out of the blue that I'm doing this," she says, noting that she didn't have a particularly observant upbringing in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley.

**H**ER JUDAISM DEEPENED after she began singing in temple choirs at age 14. "I became really involved in Judaism through music," she says. Her doctoral dissertation was on little-known Russian cantor and composer David Nowakowsky, who wrote in the style of Brahms and Mendelssohn for the Brody Synagogue in Odessa. Because he completed more than 3,000 compositions before his death in 1921,

he's called "the Bach of Jewish music," Green notes.

She was an assistant professor of music when in the summer of 1993 she attended the Aspen Music School. For an assignment she rounded up 35 musicians and presented a rare concert of Jewish music. The event changed her life.

"Murry Sidlin, my teacher, sat me down the next day at lunch," Green recalls. "He said, 'This is your niche. This is what you should do. And you should do it in Los Angeles, among the third largest Jewish population in the world, and you should do it on the most professional level you can.'"

The rest, as they say, is history.

"We're in a growth spurt," says Green. "We're the wandering Jewish orchestra." Without a home of its own, the orchestra, which wants to expand to six concerts a year, must travel to different Los Angeles venues. "We'd like to find a home if anybody can come up with a 1,200-seat auditorium," she says.

"When I was studying there were no role models of women in high

positions conducting orchestras," she says. "One of my biggest contributions is that I've [shown] that it's possible to head up a symphony and follow your dreams."

"Ambition and distinctiveness continue to mark The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony," the *Los Angeles Times* wrote after a 1998 concert by composers who came to America because of the Holocaust.

Twinning music and Jewishness has rarely been done in such a soulful and enlightening way. **H**

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