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Music, Arts & Culture

Stories from the Violins of Hope: Giving voice to the voiceless

American conductor and educator Noreen Green talks to Limelight about some remarkable survivors of the Holocaust.

by *Jason Blake* on 24 May, 2023

As the numbers of living Holocaust survivors dwindle, the importance of artefacts and stories of that terrible period in human history becomes ever more important.

That's one of the main drivers behind a new stage play, *Stories from the Violins of Hope*, which tells a remarkable true story while introducing its audience to some of the most precious and evocative objects from that time.



A violin from the Violins of Hope Collection. Photo supplied

Stories from the Violins of Hope is inspired by the Weinstein family, Israeli luthiers who have spent decades collecting and restoring instruments that once belonged to the countless Jewish musicians who perished under the Nazis.

Housed in Tel Aviv, the Weinstein collection now numbers over 100 instruments (including a viola and a cello) and at least 80 of them tour the world. Several are decorated with distinctive six-sided stars – in the early 20th century, it was not uncommon for Jewish buyers to have their violins customised with symbolic inlays.

Importantly, the violins are not just preserved. They are also played. Several have featured in major music events, including, on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, in a concert by the [Berlin Philharmonic](#) under [Sir Simon Rattle](#).

Written by Lisa Pearl Rosenbaum and adapted by Ronda Spinak, *Stories from the Violins of Hope* draws on conversations with Rosenbaum and Amnon Weinstein, whose idea it was to start the collection. These episodes are interspersed with music curated by Noreen Green, who has temporarily relocated from her home in Los Angeles to bring her expertise to the project.

Green is ideally placed. She is the founder of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, an ensemble “dedicated to the performance and preservation of orchestral works of distinction which explore Jewish culture, heritage and experience.”

Green’s involvement goes right back to the very start of the project, she tells *Limelight*.

“I actually brought the story to the writers,” she says. “I was in Israel many years ago and I visited the Weinstein shop. I had the opportunity see the violin collection up close and I can tell you, it was a very emotional experience. An overpowering experience. Very hard to put into words.”

Some years later, the Weinstein collection made the journey from Tel Aviv to Los Angeles. It fell to Green to create a concert program around the exhibition.

“During that time, I met somebody associated with the Jewish Women’s Theatre – which is now called The Braid. In the back of my mind, I had an idea that it would be wonderful if there was a play with music about the violin stories.”

From those conversations, a work of storytelling evolved, Green says. “It was beautiful, but the pandemic hit and it couldn’t be performed live. But it was recorded as a video and it was seen by thousands of people all over the world.”

Green also sent a copy to Judy Campbell, founding director of the Sydney-based [Jewish Arts](#). “She then sent it to producer Moira Blumenthal [of Sydney’s Shalom Theatre] and then, as they say, the rest is history.”

That work of storytelling has now evolved into a full-scale theatre production, *Stories from the Violins of Hope*, that will have its world premiere at Sydney’s Bondi Pavilion. The cast includes actors Barry French (who plays Amnon Weinstein), Lawrence Coy, Kate Bookilil, [Sophie Gregg](#) and Lloyd Allison-Young. Sydney violinist Ben Adler will play live on stage.



Barry French as Amnon Weinstein in *Stories from the Violins of Hope*. Photo supplied

Green says she has drawn on the classical and Jewish traditions for the music. “There is music that was played in the camps – Mozart and Mendelssohn, for example – and then there are pieces of music very specific to the owners of those violins, like a Paderewski minuet and Strauss’s *The Blue Danube*. I also intersperse those with Hassidic tunes and folksongs to help create that feeling of the Jewish soul.”

That soul, Green says, will also be present in the form of one of the violins from the Weinstein collection, which is making its way to Sydney for the opening night of *Stories from the Violins of Hope*.

“I’ve always thought that the violin encompasses the soul of a human being,” Green says. “When you play one, its body resonates with yours. You are holding it under your chin, right next to your heart. It’s the most human instrument there is and in our hands, these instruments give voice to the voiceless, tell the stories that might otherwise be forgotten.”