

Concert Review: Cantata Singers — An Evening of Biblical Power

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Susan Miron

The Cantata Singers prefaced its intriguing, Jewish-themed performance with a marvelously sensory, spiritual experience.



The Cantata Singers and conductor David Hoose. Photo: James Liu.

By Susan Miron

It took serious organizational skill to coordinate [Cantata Singers'](#) extraordinary combo of concert and Sabbath dinner last Friday night. The evening began with about a hundred of the concert's attendees having a Shabbat (the Jewish Sabbath starts at sundown on Fridays, though in May it's quite light at 6 p.m.) meal at the YMCA near New England Conservatory. The celebration came complete with challah, wine, candle-lighting, and blessings recited at each table. It was a marvelously sensory, spiritual experience that led to an intriguing, Jewish-themed performance that followed in Jordan Hall.

Over the past seven years of reviewing concerts, I have repeatedly enjoyed and praised the Cantata Singers'

superb choir, soloists, and instrumentalists. David Hoose, who next year is celebrating his 35th year as Music Director of Cantata Singers, has been constantly impressive as its conductor, and this evening he also served as the deft orchestrator of Lazar Weiner's Yiddish songs.

The Shabbat dinner led many into a concert of rarely heard music, beginning with five Yiddish art songs written between 1941 and 1973 by Weiner (1897-1982), interpreted by solo singers familiar to Cantata Singers audiences. In *New York Times*'s obit for Weiner, the great soprano Judith Raskin states that "he was the greatest exponent that we have known in this country and perhaps in the world of the Yiddish art song. He based his songs on Yiddish poems, and his music and research were intended to introduce Americans to the artistic accomplishments of Yiddish culture. His songs, infused with the rhythm of Yiddish, were alternately tender, lyrical and ironic. 'He chose extraordinary poetry and set it to music with a great understanding of the idiom of the Yiddish language and the tonal modality of Jewish music.'

"Ashrei Ho-ish," (Psalm 1) sung beautifully by tenor soloist Eric Christopher Perry and "Yihyu L'Rozon" (Psalm 19:17), sung by alto Elizabaeth Eschen, were written during Weiner's years as the Music Director at New York's Central Synagogue. Three poems by the highly respected theologian and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) were quite moving as well, both for their stirring Yiddish poetry and their musical settings. Soprano Karyl Ryczek gave a heart-wrenching solo rendition of the poem "El Khanun" (1945) by Polish-American poet Kadia Molodowsky (1894-1975). This performance was, for me, the highlight of the entire evening. The poem/song begs a "merciful" God to "pick another people for a while... We've no blood left to be victims... Sanctify another land, another mount. We have covered every field, every stone/ With sacred ash, With the old, and with the young./ We've paid with infant lives/For every letter of the Ten Commandments." Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Webb imparted beauty to another Heschel poem, "Khoyves" (Debts).

Longtime Cantata Singer, stage director, mezzo-soprano, and ordained cantor Lynn Torgove gave a moving performance of "Mayn Tfile" (My Prayer) by H. Leivick, another poem that rails against the Shoah's losses. Lines such as "My prayer freezes on my tongue. And I carry it. My prayer leaps up in explosive anger" reflect the post-Holocaust fury in Yiddish poetry. Leivick (1888-1962) is described in Hoose's program notes as a "Russian poet arrested for subversion at the age of eighteen, marched on foot for four months to Siberia, rescued and smuggled out by Jewish revolutionaries and, in 1913, brought to New York, where he became known as wallpaper hanger and the greatest Yiddish poet of his day."

Yehudi Wyner's twelve minute long "Torah Service" — commissioned in 1966 by a private individual in New Haven, Connecticut — consists of seven movements. It is a baritone solo for a cantor (beautifully sung here by Ian Pomeranz) with a four-part chorus, and scored for five (rather unusual) instruments: French horn, two trumpets, trombone, and double bass. There is no commercial recording; the Cantata Singers did us a favor by presenting this unusual gem.

In a 2009 *Boston Globe* story, critic Jeremy Eichler wrote: "To be sure, (Yehudi) Wyner's story rightly begins on the day that his father, the son of a shoemaker in Ukraine, was plucked from his town by a passing musician and given the opportunity to sing in a choir at the great Brodsky Synagogue of Kiev. Lazar went on to become a boy soprano in the Kiev opera and even sang alongside the legendary Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin. He immigrated to New York and ultimately became the leading composer of Yiddish art songs. Wyner (whose last name was changed by his father when he was a boy) is deeply admiring of his father's legacy and has labored to help preserve it."

Wyner's unusual settings were revelatory for this reviewer, given how far they strayed (always imaginatively) from traditional variants on tunes in the Torah service. I liked his last setting of three short prayers, which placed the famous "Aytz Chayim" in an alluringly peaceful and contemplative setting. ("It — the Torah — is the tree of life to them that hold fast to it.") The instrumentalists were first-rate, and it was comforting to hear this piece during such a peaceful Sabbath experience, produced by the Cantata Singers along with Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

Finally, the oft performed *Le Roi David* (1923) by Arthur Honegger received an excellent presentation. The story of

the Hebrew Bible's King David is so complicated that it takes twenty-seven songs and marches for this symphonic psalm to touch on just a few of the sage's high (and low) points: it ranges from his days as a shepherd through his brazen affair with Bathsheba, his career as a warrior and his death as an exalted king. The young and relatively unknown Honegger was given a considerable challenge: he had only a few months to provide the incidental music to René Morax's epic play, *Le Roi David*. Morax could not muster a proper orchestra from the region around the Théâtre du Jorat — he could only come up with a ragtag bunch of local musicians. Honegger was given the additional challenge of balancing a large choir with the sound of a relatively tiny, non-standard instrumental ensemble. He has to make do with a group of 17 musicians playing a hodgepodge of brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments. There was only one string bass. Despite these difficult circumstances, the premiere of *Le Roi David* went off as planned, and Honegger scored a great success with his incidental music. After this triumph, Honegger's admirers took to calling him "King Arthur."

The orchestra, conducting, and soloists (the same as in the Lazar Weiner selections, with the addition of soprano Angelynn Hinson and Majie Zeller) were first-rate; this was quite a compelling performance. Oddly, what remains in my memory most clearly is the gorgeous performances on oboe by Peggy Pearson and cello by Rafael Popper-Keizer, and the regal narration supplied by local actor Nael Nacer, who infused the story of King David with spellbinding biblical power.

Susan Miron, a harpist, has been a book reviewer for over 20 years for a large variety of literary publications and newspapers. Her fields of expertise were East and Central European, Irish, and Israeli literature. Susan covers classical music for *The Arts Fuse* and *The Boston Musical Intelligencer*.