

# A Party Concert: LA Jewish Symphony Celebrates 20 Years!

By Rabbi Baruch Cohon

LOS ANGELES — On Sunday Sept. 7th a joyous audience filled the Ford Amphitheatre to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony. Billed as “LAJS Presents Hershey Felder in Concert,” this was definitely Felder’s evening. Having attended a Felder one-man performance at the Gefen, this reviewer can appreciate his accomplishments as a serious pianist and an expert interpreter of Gershwin. Here he interspersed his virtuosity with shtick, regaling the audience with his reminiscences of Broadway, of Yiddish Theater and of his own career. Not to mention getting the audience to sing a few words of “Embraceable You” in harmony.

During the 20 years since Dr. Noreen Green founded LAJS, she built it into an important musical organization, the only symphony orchestra in America dedicated to the performance and preservation of music reflective of the Jewish experience. She still conducts with gusto and addresses her audience with charm. Additionally her educational program now reaches Jewish day schools, public schools in many places, some with all Latino students,

etc. Many of these young students thus hear orchestral music for the first time. Attorney/developer Mark Lainer, a major backer of LAJS, and past chairman of the Jewish Community Federation, remembers how he succeeded in obtaining grants for these educational programs. As Noreen Green was proud to announce, these programs have reached some 14,000 children to date.

The 20th anniversary concert ranks as one of the lightest in LAJS history. After the National Anthem, and Noreen Green welcoming us to a highlight of her “incredible journey,” the concert opened with Hershey Felder’s prelude and invocation and his arrangement of Hatikvah. Then we grooved on a delightful composition called “Rondo a la Klez” by clarinetist Zinovy Goro who brings the sound of “simcha” to the concert stage. He also played the lead in the evening’s encore, the “Happy Nigun.”

After the Rondo, Felder took over, with an anecdote-filled exploration of the work of Irving Berlin, and with somewhat less detail of Leonard Bernstein who was represented by the full orchestra playing the Overture to Westside Story. Then we got



*In front, Hershey Felder and Noreen Green with the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony at the concert. Credit: Guy Madmoni*

some reminiscences of Yiddish Theater, from Goldfaden to Ellstein and finally to Secunda and Jacobs for the inevitable “By Mir Bistu Sheyn.” Any old wedding musician would only miss Olshanetsky and the Andrews Sisters.

But seriously, folks... Hershey Felder turned to his cre-

ative side and played his Aliyah for Piano and Orchestra, dramatically echoing in its three movements the spirit of 1939, 1945 and 1948. First the somber sound of hopelessness and tragedy, then the turgent fight for a future, and at last the joy of independence. A truly interesting work.

An old friend of Noreen Green’s, Claire Marks, values her as an incredible conductor who brings vitality and musical opportunity to the community, indeed to young talent everywhere, giving performers and composers a chance to be heard. She is glad to be a major supporter of LAJS for the past 5 years, and looks forward to the “next 20” for their music to lighten our hearts. A 15-year backer is Board of Advisers member Bonnie Somers, who met Noreen at a performance of Aaron Zigman’s composition “Rabin,” and became a LAJS volunteer. Also vice-president of the Milken Family Foundation, Bonnie arrived to congratulate Noreen on the 20-year triumph, and looks forward to the orchestra continuing to fill a real need.

Part of that need was filled in the second half of the program, as Hershey Felder and the orchestra played Ferde Grofe’s score of the Gershwin classic “Rhapsody in Blue.” A fitting finale to a fun and friendly party concert. Congratulations, LAJS!

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