

KINDRED SPIRITS 2009

The harmony and rhythm of *tikkun olam*

Concert review by Rabbi Baruch Cohon

Actor Ed Asner declared himself “in awe” as he replied to the award presented to him at this year’s Kindred Spirits concert. And in fact there were some awesome elements to the evening.

A full Disney Hall heard the harmony and rhythm of *tikkun olam* – “setting the world in order” -- on June 7th as the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony teamed with St. Mel’s Parish Singers, the Valley Beth Shalom Choir, the St. James Sacred Nation Gospel Choir, solo saxophonist Dave Koz and the solo voices of Ilysia Pierce, Ron Li-Paz and Ilan Davidson. Davidson, Cantor of Temple Beth El in San Pedro, conceived and produced this second annual Kindred Spirits evening and presided over the awards to Asner and the Grossman Burn Center. A major beneficiary of the funds raised by this effort is Heifer International, an organization that rehabilitates poverty-stricken farmers in many parts of the world by giving them animals to help them sustain themselves and pass on their benefits to others. Several films dramatized the success of Heifer International programs.

Musically the program explored several contrasting styles, all of which drew enthusiastic applause. The orchestra opened with a rousing rendition of Kevin Kaska’s *Festive Overture* which featured some singularly lyrical work by the trombone section and the woodwinds. As usual, conductor Dr. Noreen Green runs a tight and vigorous musical ship, setting a professional standard that sustained the concert. Vocal solos were less even. *From a Distance* by Julie Gold involved all three soloists. Ron Li-Paz is a powerful baritone, Ilan Davidson a smooth and lyrical tenor, and Ilysia Pierce boasts a wide range which in this number reached for high notes reminiscent of *American Idol* contestants. Later in the evening she sang a solo composed for her by Sharon Farber that stimulated her to bring out the superior quality she is capable of.

Michael Isaacson's orchestration of Max Helfman's *Sh'ma Koleinu* provided a stirring background for Ilan Davidson's impassioned and artistic rendition of a modern synagogue classic. Doubtless some in the audience objected to the full mention of the Divine name in a concert-hall performance. But the music itself has a sacred quality, and as I remember Helfman I know he would highly approve of both Isaacson's and Davidson's work.

Opera and Broadway selections followed. Ron Li-Paz gave us a polished *Zaccharia's Prayer* accompanied by the orchestra's cello and bass section, from Verdi's *Nabucco*, that revealed a solid opera background – hardly a surprise coming from the son of Israeli opera star Michael Li-Paz. Verdi is clearly his idiom. Gershwin maybe not. The audience enjoyed *I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'* despite some difficulties. In Bizet's *Pearl Fisher's Duet* however, the tenor and baritone cantors deservedly brought down the house, achieving a surprisingly perfect blend of two very different voices.

Dave Koz contributed an alto sax ad lib rendering of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, by a cantor's son named Harold Arlen, which Koz dedicated to his mother's memory as her favorite song. Certainly in 1939 it was many people's favorite, and made Judy Garland a star.

Ensemble vocal and instrumental numbers included Aaron Copland's *The Promise of Living*, a Hebrew/English first-act finale called *As You Walk With Me/Im Yirtze haShem*, and the concert finale -- Lionel Ritchie's *We Are the World*. In all of them, the orchestra shone. The soloists and choirs sang well and in perfect sync, but due to the placement of the choirs and the size of the orchestra, we heard the singers best during the time when the orchestra rested. LAJS tenor sax soloist Robert Elfman played a great intro to *I Know Where I've Been*.

In Total Praise featured the St. James Sacred Nation Gospel Choir, who lined the stage apron and executed a moving, if treble-heavy, performance culminating in a coda of Amens building from mellow *pianissimo* to a powerful triple *forte*—truly an artistic treat.

Once again LAJS pianist Chris Hardin created skillful orchestrations for several selections including *We Are the World, No One Has to be Alone* by Michele Brouman and Amanda McBroom with a solo by Davidson that revealed striking versatility, and Sam Glaser's engagingly modern treatment of the 121st Psalm, entitled *Lift My Eyes*.

Our publisher Phil Blazer rounded out the evening with a vigorous and entertaining personal message. The event promises a bright and productive future for Cantor Davidson's brainchild. Future benefits could spearhead a valuable difference for many people who need it most.

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