

In New Work, Jewish Symphony Celebrates 'Women of Valor'
By RICHARD S. GINELL, Special to The Times
Copyright 2000 Los Angeles Times
Tuesday, April 18, 2000

Taken from Proverbs 31, which describes nothing less than Superwoman, "Women of Valor" was the theme of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony's hugely ambitious program Sunday at Royce Hall. It is a phrase loaded with multiple meanings and expectations. "Women of Valor" was also the title of Philadelphia-based composer Andrea Clearfield's new three-movement oratorio, whose world premiere performance easily dominated the afternoon. The women in question are heroines from biblical times, and by implication, Jewish women of today--and perhaps even more specifically, the women who labored to write and perform the music. Even the recurring five-note motto of the work was based on the syllables of its title.

For all its boisterous Jewish dance rhythms, romantic rhetorical climaxes and affirmations of tonality, the work's scoring is mostly clear and deft, not at all heavy, even glistening at times. The lavishly whirling dance of Miriam--which was the encore at the concert's close--was the chief crowd-pleaser, yet the most effective portion of the score was its haunting, mysterious opening.

The hourlong structure has uneven passages. The hectic coda seemed particularly forced upon first hearing, but it certainly inspired impassioned singing from the richly mellifluous mezzo-soprano of Gail Dubinbaum and the lightweight, silvery soprano of Hila Plitmann. Actress Valerie Harper issued authoritative spoken proclamations between the sung texts, and conductor Noreen Green produced a vital response from her very good orchestra.

The three brief preludes before intermission were also by female Jewish composers--a civilized, repetitive Overture from Fanny Mendelssohn; Meira Warshauer's liquid-textured "Like Streams in the Desert"; and Tsippi Fleischer's pounding Hebraic dance "Strings-Bow and Arrow" (with concertmaster Mark Kashper soloing).