

FANFARE: Jerry Dubins

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WARSHAUER Shacharit. Like Streams in the Desert. Ahavah • Kirk Trevor, cond; Stephanie Gregory (sop); Jennifer Hines (mez); Michael Hendrick (ten); Carol Potter (nar); Slovak RSO; Slovak Ph Ch • ALBANY TROY 973 (65:42)

WARSHAUER Symphony No. 1, “Living Breathing Earth.” Concerto for Shofar and Trombone, “Tekeyyah” • Peter Vronsky, cond; Haim Avitsur (shofar, tbn); Moravian PO • NAVONA 5842 (50:58)

As stated at the outset of the interview, Meira Warshauer has devoted much of her creative output to Jewish themes and their universal message. Not unrelated is the fact that her work also reflects a love and concern for the earth. For the most part, however, her music is not directly derived from traditional Jewish melodies or synagogue cantillation, and when it is, as with some of the source material she drew upon from the Sound Archives collection of the Hebrew University, it is thoroughly absorbed, integrated, and metamorphosed into a musical language that is Warshauer’s own.

The vocabulary and style are mostly late 20th-century postmodern, though sometimes, as in the sound effects achieved in the “Call of the Cicadas” movement from the Symphony No. 1, Warshauer flirts with the avant-garde. But her music is always firmly rooted in readily recognizable formal processes of statement, extension, variation, contrast, development, and restatement. In other words, the music has shape and form, sets up expectations through a variety of tension-building techniques, and ultimately satisfies those expectations by resolving the conflicts.

If I hear any influence in some of the passages for narrator and

orchestra in Warshauer’s *Shacharit*, it would have to be Leonard Bernstein’s *Kaddish* Symphony, but the similitude is fleeting. The more lasting impression is of an expansive lyricism filled with an almost ecstatic feeling of compassion. The heavy orchestral arsenal of percussion also contributes materially to the celebratory sense— the clapping of hands and shouting for joy— throughout much of the work.

Like Streams in the Desert can only be described as a nine-minute orchestral tone poem of exquisite delicacy.

It begins as a landscape seen at twilight through the gauze of a slightly exotic-sounding, almost Delius-like setting, but it soon transits to an animated, jazz-inflected Gershwin-esque/Coplandesque middle section that once again seems to express the same sense of life-affirming joy heard in *Shacharit*. A return to the opening material comes, as expected, toward the end, but Warshauer surprises us with a joyous coda that recalls the middle episode.

Ahavah for mezzo-soprano, chorus, and orchestra is in three movements, and to some extent harks back to the ecstatic style of *Shacharit*. Percussion still plays a prominent role in the orchestration, but the music now is more hushed by a sense of spiritual awe. I would just single out Jennifer Hines, who sings the alto part magnificently.

For the computer-inclined, the *Living Breathing Earth* CD offers additional features of considerable interest. The disc will play normally in a regular CD player, but if it's inserted into your computer's CD drive, you can access an interview of Meira Warshauer by Richard Kowal of WCQS Asheville Public Radio, as well as a public radio profile broadcast covering the work's debut by the Dayton Philharmonic. But perhaps most

fun for an avid score reader and fancier of iPads and similar electronic devices is the ability to follow the score of *Living Breathing Earth* in one of

the cleverest PC applications I've encountered. Place your mouse pointer at the top right-hand corner of the page and drag it in a downward diagonal motion. As you do, the page literally turns as it would in a book. I've never seen this done before in a standard PC app, and it really tickled me. It was almost more fun to turn the pages than to actually try to follow the score, which is for a very large orchestra, making the notation small and difficult to read. You may be able to increase the size by resetting your display screen's resolution, but I doubt it, since the font point of the score is set to a size that permits the full vertical height of a page of the score, with all of its instrument staves, to be viewed on the page.

As for the music, as noted, the first movement of Warshauer's symphony, filled with the all-too-realistic sounds of millions of swarming insects, harmless though they may be, makes my flesh crawl. But the second movement, depicting a river scene at night, presents an entirely different soundscape. In it, Warshauer really reveals herself as a romantic at heart.

The piece is a beautiful, atmospheric nocturne that at times reminds me of the quieter moments in Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*, and there is one passage in particular that conjures the dreamlike state of rapture at the end of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*.

The Concerto for Shofar and Trombone on the *Living Breathing Earth* CD is certainly novel, though I wouldn't call it a novelty, for we tend to associate that word with something that has little or no value, a mere bauble. Warshauer's concerto is anything but a bauble, but indeed, one must ask, "Who would ever have thought of such a thing?!" As you've already gleaned, the shofar is capable of sounding basically two pitches, the E above middle C, and the C a sixth above that. Moreover, anyone who has ever tried to blow the thing can tell you that it has a mind of its own and that it cannot be counted on to produce even those two pitches reliably and on demand. The truth is it's not really a musical instrument; at least

that was not its original purpose. Of necessity, Warshauer has written a part for it that is pretty much limited to the punctuating *ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta* fanfares which, amazingly, Haim Avitsur manages to make sound in tune and in time on every single entrance. In

between, he doubles on trombone, a much more manageable instrument for which Warshauer has written quite artfully, and which Avitsur plays masterfully.

Both of these CDs contain music that is very beautiful and deeply moving. I recommend them to listeners of all persuasions.