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# The Sacred Concert Hall: Meira Warshauer's Orchestral Works

CHRISTINA L. REITZ

Meira Warshauer's symphonic output features a unique mixture of her Jewish faith and environmental concerns. Raised in Wilmington, North Carolina, she pursued a spiritual journey through Eastern mysticism and meditation before returning to Judaism and a conservative egalitarian tradition. Her continuing ecological activism is nearly as significant to her identity. Although seemingly distinct, these two interests, as viewed by Warshauer, are connected, and both have inspired and energized her orchestral compositions.

Warshauer does not have a codified philosophy of composition, but she offers the following advice: "Write from the heart, imagine it first, hear as much as you can in your mind before you get too specific. Let the music and your imagination lead you."<sup>1</sup> She credits her teacher at the University of South Carolina, composer Gordon Goodwin, with recommending the technique of improvising in her imagination. Although her practice varies, her general routine is to "imagine the whole piece, listening internally." She does this with a stopwatch in hand and takes notes on elements such as orchestration and pitch-rhythmic relationships. She explained: "Then I have a blueprint. When I start composing, it may change and go in different directions, but at least I have a concept of where I am headed."<sup>2</sup>

Since completing her doctoral dissertation at the University of South Carolina in 1989, Warshauer has written a number of works for orchestra, which she likens to "those big boxes of 64 crayons, with all the colors. There's no limit."<sup>3</sup> She describes her orchestral style as Neo-Romantic and says that the orchestral works of Debussy, Bernstein, and Copland as well as the early ballets of Stravinsky were influential. Many of her peers, also budding composers, found writing for a symphonic ensemble to be too risky because of limited performance opportunities. She was inspired by one of her teachers, Thomas McKinley, who stressed the importance of writing new symphonic music, a principle that has remained with Warshauer through the years. She was fortunate that in South Carolina she was able to establish a relationship with large ensembles that were receptive to contemporary music, particular-

ly the South Carolina Philharmonic and the University of South Carolina Symphony.

One such work was *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, written in 1991 from a commission by the South Carolina Philharmonic to commemorate the bicentennial of Mozart's death. The work references the well-known opening motive from Mozart's Symphony No. 40. The title, however, is taken from a verse in Isaiah: "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea."<sup>4</sup> The opening section explores the descending minor-second motive, from Mozart, while the second section, in a calmer mood, transforms the motive into "agents of inner awakening and strength" before returning to the origi-



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nal idea. In the coda, the composer incorporates a brief quotation from the second movement of Mozart's symphony, and amidst this cascade of sound, the trumpet presents its own distinct melody "filling the hall 'as the waters cover the sea.'"<sup>5</sup>

*Revelation* followed in 1994 and served as Warshauer's musical answer to a question posed by her spiritual teacher, Rabbi Schlomo Carlebach: "How real is G-d to you?" She wanted to communicate her personal religious awakening (or revelation) while enabling audiences to have their own unique experience. The work is in two contrasting sections, the first presents the "overwhelming power of that which is beyond perception," while the second section moves to the inner soul and closes with a melody that recalls "the vanishing culture of East European Jewry."<sup>6</sup> William Zagorski reviewed the

work in *Fanfare*: "I found it striking in its orchestration, harmonic structure, rhetorical power and haunting eloquence. Having revisited it in preparation for this review some 17 years later, I find its profound religiosity more moving than before."<sup>7</sup>

The compositional history behind *Ahavah* (Love) illuminates perfectly the spiritual and secular concerns of the composer. Warshauer was teaching at a Jewish Renewal retreat at Bryn Mawr College in July 1991, and after meditating and praying under a silver maple tree, she felt impelled to connect with the tree. She explained:

Embracing her wide trunk, I gazed up into her branches and asked if she had a song for humanity. In the listening silence, I heard a three-note chant on the word *ahavah*, Hebrew for "love." When I brought the tree's song to my class, we immediately realized the spiritual power in its simple beauty. Jewish tradition teaches that an all-pervasive love flows from the Creator, sustaining life on earth. The silver maple's *ahavah* chant reminds us that love is the path for healing and returning us to wholeness with our Creator and with the Earth. This chant, along with texts from Deuteronomy, which are part of the daily prayers, became the theme and inspiration.<sup>8</sup>

To interpret the religious texts, she referred to the teachings of Rabbis Arthur Waskow and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.<sup>9</sup> The eleventh chapter of Deuteronomy, on which this work is based, instructs the Israelites to obey the religious laws to receive the reward of great abundance from the land and G-d, followed by a warning that if the law is ignored, the goodness will be eradicated. Rabbi Waskow had been lecturing specifically on this passage and interpreted the context in contemporary terms as a warning to care for the Earth, which Warshauer took immediately to heart.

The three movements follow the chronology of the Scripture, the first, *Sh'ma v'ahavtah* (Hear and love), opens with a *Sh'ma* (hear/listen). This dramatic introduction serves as a warning followed by

a promise of love and fulfillment that explores the *ahavah* chant the composer received at Bryn Mawr. The second movement, *Hishamru* (Beware), was the most challenging to write because Warshauer had to face the troubling text of “You shall die.” Before the work was recorded, she revised that passage to include initially omitted texts that been too frightening.<sup>10</sup> To paint the dismal prophecy, this movement contains many chromatic, dissonant, and jarring harmonies. The third movement, *V’samtem* (Place these words), brings the work full circle and returns the order and G-d’s promise to the Jews referenced by the reappearance of the *ahavah* chant.<sup>11</sup> The work was funded with support from the South Carolina Arts Commission and was premiered by the Columbia Choral Society and the South Carolina Philharmonic in 1994 under the baton of Nicholas Smith with Jena Eison, mezzo-soprano.

One of Warshauer’s first multi-movement orchestral compositions, *Jerusalem, Open Your Gates* (1997), was premiered in 1998 by the Hillel Festival Orchestra in celebration of Israel’s fiftieth anniversary. Although it is a three-movement symphonic work, Warshauer did not call it a symphony—she did not write her first true symphony until the following decade. According to the composer’s program notes, *Jerusalem, Open Your Gates* “interprets ancient teachings to create a musical vessel for peace.” The work connects the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to the city of Jerusalem. Warshauer explained that “according to Jewish mystical tradition, it [Jerusalem] is the point where Divine energy flows into the world, and this concept is reflected in all three faiths. Jews ascend to Jerusalem, the place where G-d’s presence was revealed in the Holy Temple; Jesus was resurrected from the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem; and Mohammed rose from Jerusalem’s Al-Haram Al-Sharif to heaven in his nocturnal vision.”<sup>12</sup>

Each movement contains its own title related to three priestly blessings of the ancient Temple. Warshauer described the opening movement, “Enter the Sacred Space,” as a preparation for the first blessing: “G-d will bless you and keep you”; the listener enters the “sacred space, the temple in our hearts, our own luminous holiness.” “Arise into Radiant Grace,” the second movement, continues the bless-

ings: “G-d will shine G-d’s countenance upon you and be gracious unto you,” and “G-d will lift up G-d’s countenance upon you and grant you peace.” In this movement, Warshauer utilizes three melodies from each religious tradition: *David melech yisrael* (Judaism), the Gregorian chant *Judaea et Jerusalem* (Christianity), and an *adhan*, or call to prayer (Islam). The final movement, “Open Your Gates and Receive G-d’s Glory,” is based on Psalm 24. The three melodies introduced previously return to make the work cyclical, combined with a shofar-like call presented by the trumpets. Warshauer’s program notes conclude, “May Jerusalem’s destiny as a city of peace and source of radiant holiness in the world be fulfilled quickly, in our lifetime.”

*Like Streams in the Desert* (1998) was commissioned by the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, with support from the Jewish Federation of Greater Dayton, and was premiered to honor Israel’s fiftieth anniversary. The title originates from the second half of Psalm 126, “Return us from our exile, Oh G-d, like streams in the desert.” This short, six-versed Psalm asks for restored fortunes for the Jews and is traditionally sung to introduce the blessing following the meal on the Sabbath. Because the Jewish people have migrated internationally, the melodies sung to this Psalm vary considerably based on location. Warshauer includes three distinct tunes to accommodate this diversity: a Salonikan Greek melody presented by the oboe and trumpet, a Yemenite version heard at the percussion’s entrance, and finally, a Moroccan tune in the strings. As the work progresses, motives from Gregorian chant and Persian music are incorporated as an invitation to the entire Earth to join in the celebration.

Warshauer compiled the source melodies from the Psalms housed in the National Sound Archives at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where the composer was conducting research for this commission. Captivated by the diversity of the Israelis, she recalled:

One day, riding a bus in Jerusalem, I sat next to an elderly man....I asked him how long he had lived in Jerusalem, and he responded, “all my life.” I asked what it was like to see so many changes over the course of his life. He answered, it was “like a

dream” or in Hebrew, “c’cholam.” I recognized that phrase, “Hayinu c’cholmim” or “we were (or will be) like dreamers” because it appears in Psalm 126. I wondered if it had been sung all over the world, and if so, what were the melodies used. I found my answers in the Phonoteca (from the National Sound Archives). Of the 20 or more melodies, I selected three which I thought would work well together musically, and which represented the variety of communities then living in Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Although the work has not yet had a live performance in Israel, it has been aired twice on Israeli radio. Jerry Dubins’ *Fanfare* review of the CD describes the work “as a nine-minute orchestral tone poem of exquisite delicacy.”<sup>14</sup>

Warshauer’s first symphony, a twenty-five-minute work entitled *Symphony No. 1: Living, Breathing Earth* (2007), was commissioned by the Western Piedmont Symphony (Hickory, NC), the South Carolina Philharmonic, and the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra (see Example 1). She said: “I felt I had matured enough in my orchestra writing to attempt writing ‘a symphony.’” It has four movements, but she did not “consider that as defining a symphony.” She commented: “In calling it Symphony No. 1, I may be implying there are others to follow. I hope so!”<sup>15</sup>

The title originated in Warshauer’s recollection of an elementary school lesson when she was taught to view the rainforests as “the lungs of the world.” As an adult practicing yoga and breathing, this phrase returned to her, particularly in the context of global warming and the continuing threat of increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The relationship to Judaism would be the concept of *tikkun olam*, or “world healing,” and the responsibility of people to be the “stewards of creation.” Warshauer explains in her program notes:

We know life on earth is in danger, with many species sick and dying from our pollution, and the atmosphere losing its protective qualities. The very breath of the earth, the relationship between carbon dioxide and oxygen, is out of balance. Sometimes it takes a threat of loss for us to realize the blessings we have, and to act to

# Symphony Number 1: Living, Breathing Earth

## I. Call of the Cicadas

Meira Warshauer

\* Bassoons bend pitch with lip as much as possible to approximate glissando to the next pitch.  
Try to take up full rhythmic value of note for glissando. \*\* approximate pitch

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preserve them. Just as when praying for the healing of a loved one we picture the person in perfect health, so in this symphony, I celebrate the earth in her radiant fullness.<sup>16</sup>

The natural environment played a pivotal role in the compositional process, particularly the sounds of cicadas, the shapes and movement of birds, changing colors on a Georgia mountain, the view of the stars from the Amazon, and lastly the image of Earth as seen from the moon.<sup>17</sup> Composing the first movement of the symphony was a joy for Warshauer. She experimented on her violin playing tremolo passages behind the bridge to discover that she could produce a sound similar to the “white noise and rhythms of the cicadas.” She scored this effect for the violins and violas and combined the sizzle cymbal with fast, repeated notes in the upper woodwinds to resemble a cicada chorus. She said: “When I realized I could treat the whole orchestra like it was a giant cicada, lots of possibilities opened up for translating this energy to the exciting forces available with a large orchestra.”<sup>18</sup> The composer recalled the strong influence the Amazon had on this work: “In 2005, when I knew I would be writing this symphony, I went to Peru with my family to visit the rainforest. I felt, if I was to be evoking the Living Breathing Earth, I would need to visit the rainforest, the ‘lungs of the earth,’ to see what it had to teach me. We flew to Iquitos, and took a magical evening boat ride down the Tahuayo River...the inspiration for the 2nd movement of the symphony.”<sup>19</sup>

While composing the initial movement, Warshauer viewed the orchestration

Ex. 1. Symphony No. 1, page 1



and textures as protagonists, which motivated her to write the movement in full score from its inception. She found it immensely satisfying to imagine the colors despite the lengthy process. "I remember feeling ecstatic, effort rewarded with almost every phrase in that movement."<sup>20</sup> She composed the last movement after the first movement to avoid rushing the ending: "That was a good decision because I kept thinking I had written the end of the movement, but each day, when I would return to look at the score, I realized there was more needed. That went on for about a week! Now that's one of my favorite parts of the symphony—how the ending keeps getting bigger and bigger."<sup>21</sup>

In 2009, Warshauer completed *Tekeeyah* (a call), a concerto for shofar (a horn, traditionally from a ram) and trombone, an unusual instrumentation inspired by her previous contact with Haim Avitsur, for whom the piece was composed (see Example 2). Warshauer met Avitsur in 2007 when both were featured guests with the Western Piedmont Symphony. Although the shofar is generally sounded by brass instrumentalists accustomed to smaller mouthpieces, Avitsur's enthusiasm and prior experience with the shofar quickly convinced the composer that he was capable of the formidable challenge. The shofar has neither mouthpiece nor finger holes to produce varying pitches; rather, the different tones are created solely by the player's embouchure. Because of these severe limitations, Warshauer alternated between the shofar and the trombone, Avitsur's primary instrument.

411 **Slightly faster** ♩ = 152 75

Fl. 1  
Picc.  
Ob. 1  
Ob. 2  
1  
Cl.  
2  
Bsn. 1  
Bsn. 2  
1  
Hn.  
2  
3  
4  
1  
Tpt.  
2  
1  
Tbn.  
2  
Tuba  
Temp.  
Perc. 1  
Perc. 2  
Harp  
Shof.  
411 **Slightly faster** ♩ = 152  
Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.  
Vcl.  
D.B.

Ex. 2. *Tekeeyah*, page 75

The shofar has an extensive history, perhaps longer than any other instrument (figure 1). It is mentioned numerous times in both the Old Testament and the Talmud. The shofar is symbolically used to refer to the ram that, according to Scripture, appeared to Abraham to replace his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> Over time and migration of the Jewish Diaspora, the instrument has been relegated to use primarily during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.



Fig. 1. Shofar

Warshauer's initial exposure to the shofar came through the Temple of Israel's High Holiday services she attended as a child. She experienced its power again in Columbia, South Carolina at a Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony. She recalled, "There were six quiet sounds for the 6 million. They were mournful, like a sigh. So I knew the shofar had a range of emotional capability, from the piercingly intense sound we know well, to a full and embracing sound when played quietly."<sup>23</sup> In her studies with Rabbi Hesh Epstein, she also examined the *Shulchan Aruch*, a traditional Jewish source that explains the proper way to sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

Warshauer met with Avitsur several times at the Mannes School of Music to explore sound possibilities. The composer recorded these meetings for use during the compositional process. Avitsur and Warshauer remained in contact frequently through phone calls, e-mails, and even a Skype session for her to hear the solo part. She recalled, "Haim approached the piece like an athlete, training the muscles

of the face for endurance and predictability. I wrote several *ossias* parts for other instruments...to relieve him, if necessary. It turned out, though, that he really didn't need most of the *ossias*."<sup>24</sup>

She sketched the opening of the concerto during a 2008 residency at the MacDowell Colony. As Warshauer continued to work on the piece, she experienced the beginning of life through the birth of her daughter's second child. The final inspiration for the work came through her volunteer work as a "citizen intervener" at the Public Service Commission of South Carolina, where a debate was raging about building a nuclear power plant. During this time, Warshauer was composing the middle section, which she calls "Breaking Walls" (although not formally notated in the score as such). It recounts the Biblical story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho. The composer wanted to communicate to her audience: "Break down the walls we create inside—walls which insulate us from our true feelings."<sup>25</sup> The third section of the concerto, "Dance of Truth," derives its primary rhythmic material from the traditional shofar usages in the synagogue: *Teruah*, a minimum of nine detached notes; *Shevarim*, three short notes; and *Tekeeyah g'dolah*, a sustained *tekeeyah* that is used during the Rosh Hashanah service and the end of Yom Kippur. The 9/8 meter is particularly conducive to the imitation of the *Teruah* and the *Shevarim* (notated as three dotted-quarter notes). The title of the concerto derives from the sustained *tekeeyah*. Warshauer described the use of the shofar:

I use all the forms for blowing the shofar, because the process of recognizing where we are broken, and shattering the walls which keep us from the experi-

ence of unity are what leads us to wholeness. I also drew on an additional one that is used in my community for *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day), which may include glissandi and soft playing in the low register. For *Yom HaShoah*, it signifies mournfulness and remembrance. But in the concerto, I place those sounds toward the beginning, and to me, they signify the soul before it is born, before it is embodied. Those opening glissandi finally resolve...and I mark in the score "Alive, ensouled."<sup>26</sup>

The composer provided the following program notes for the Western Piedmont Symphony:

I believe our time calls for an awakening to our true essence as human beings. Our planet needs us, and we need each other, to care for and heal our suffering world. The shofar (ram's horn) with its natural power and centuries of service in calling Jews to awaken, can be an important instrument in this collective awakening and renewal of purpose. The shofar calls us. It calls us before we are born. It calls us to enter the world. It is our touchstone as we move through life's challenges. It helps break through walls we construct around our essence. Those protective walls may be the very ones that keep us from our true knowing. The shofar calls us to return.<sup>27</sup>

Avitsur's shofar was made from the horn of an African antelope on loan from the Lemberger family. On the composer's blog, she provides an amusing anecdote about the difficulty he had traveling with such an obscure instrument: "One unforeseen issue was getting the shofar through customs! He had to go through customs in Brussels because of changing terminals between flights, and they thought his shofar...might have been poached from a protected species! (That shofar is over 40 years old and is older than Haim.)"<sup>28</sup>

In his review of the recently recorded *Tekeeyah*, Daniel Coombs describes the work as an "exciting piece with moments of great tranquility" and he recommends it as "compelling new orchestral

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Held annually in March, the Women Composers Festival of Hartford is an exciting celebration of the diverse music created by women past and present. This twelfth festival will feature music by our Guest Composer, Judith Shatin, as well as composers selected through various calls for scores. Events include concerts focusing on choral music, electro-acoustic music, chamber orchestra music, and more. Seminars and presentations will also be given at The Hartt School, Capital Community College, and Central Connecticut State University. All events will be held in the Greater Hartford area on March 4-11, 2012. Please visit us online at [www.womencomposersfestivalhartford.com](http://www.womencomposersfestivalhartford.com), on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/HartfordWCF>, or on Twitter at @HartfordWCF for more details. We hope you will come celebrate this valuable repertoire with us!

music." He also reviewed Symphony No. 1, on the same disc. He describes it as "a beautiful piece" with an "attractive score with delicate colors and lovely melodies and [it] serves as a kind of neo-Romantic soundtrack to nature." He was previously unfamiliar with Warshauer's music, and he enthusiastically praised her music as "refreshing and revealing."<sup>29</sup>

The sacred influences and environmental concerns in Meira Warshauer's music are connected to the past as well as the present, not only in philosophy but also in instrumentation and use of extended techniques. Her music asks her audience to transcend religious and social ideological boundaries, and her orchestral works offer a vibrant voice in the concert hall.

#### Discography of Meira Warshauer's Orchestral Works:

*Living Breathing Earth*, Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra, Petr Vansky, conductor. Navona Records NV5842. Includes *Symphony No. 1: Living, Breathing Earth* and *Tekeeyah*

*Musicscapes*, USC Symphony, Neal Casey, conductor. MMC Recordings/IODA. Includes *Jerusalem, Open Your Gates* (last movement, "Open Your Gates and Receive God's Glory")

*Streams in the Desert*, Slovak Philharmonic Chorus and the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra, Kirk Trevor, conductor. Albany Records TROY973. Includes *Shacharit, Like Streams in the Desert*, and *Ahavah*

*Robert Black Conducts*, Silesian Philharmonic, Robert Black, conductor. MMC 2008. Includes *Revelation*

#### NOTES

1. Meira Warshauer, e-mail message to author, July 1, 2011.

2. Ibid.

3. Carol Simmons, "Early lessons recalled in 'Living, Breathing' music; Dayton Philharmonic to perform regional premiere of composer Meira Warshauer's first symphony." *Dayton Daily News* (April 22, 2007). <http://www.lexisnexis.com>

4. Many religious Jews write "G-d" out of respect and reverence, although there is no prohibition in Jewish law against writing out the word in English.

5. Warshauer, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*. [http://meirawarshauer.com/NEW/pages/Program\\_notes/Waters\\_notes.htm](http://meirawarshauer.com/NEW/pages/Program_notes/Waters_notes.htm)

6. Warshauer, *Revelation*. [http://meirawarshauer.com/NEW/pages/Program\\_notes/Revelation\\_notes.html](http://meirawarshauer.com/NEW/pages/Program_notes/Revelation_notes.html)

7. William Zagorski, "Feature Review." *Fanfare* (Sept/Oct 2011).

8. Warshauer, *Ahavah* (Love).

9. Ibid.

10. Jerry Dubins, "Sounding the Shofar—An Interview with Composer Meira Warshauer." *Fanfare* (Sept/Oct 2011). <http://www.fanfaremag.com/content/view/44666/10245>

11. Warshauer, *Ahavah* (Love).

12. Warshauer, *Jerusalem, Open Your Gates*.

13. Warshauer, e-mail, July 1, 2011.

14. Dubins, *Fanfare*.

15. Carson Cooman, "Three Questions before the First Night." *Music and Vision* (January 25, 2007). <http://www.mvdaily.com/articles/2007/01/meira-warshauer.htm>

16. Warshauer, e-mail, July 22, 2011.

17. Simmons, *Dayton Daily News*.

18. Dubins, *Fanfare*.

19. Warshauer, e-mail, July 1, 2011.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Dubins, *Fanfare*.

23. Rahel Musleah, "A Concerto for Ancient Hebrew Ram's Horn." *The Jewish Daily Forward* (November 20, 2009). <http://www.forward.com/articles/118648/>

24. Warshauer, e-mail, July 1, 2011.

25. Warshauer, "A Composer's Journey." *Signature* 3/2 (Spring/Summer 2011). <http://www.maudpowell.org/signature/Portals/0/pdfs/signature/SignatureSpringSummer2011.pdf>

26. Warshauer, e-mail, July 1, 2011.

27. Warshauer, *Tekeeyah* (a call). [http://meirawarshauer.com/NEW/pages/Program\\_notes/tekeeyah\\_notes.html](http://meirawarshauer.com/NEW/pages/Program_notes/tekeeyah_notes.html)

28. Warshauer, "Getting shofar through Customs," *Meira Warshauer: Notes*. <http://meirawarshauer.com/blog/?paged=2>

29. Daniel Coombs, "Meira Warshauer: 'Living Breathing Earth.'" *Audiophile Audition* (September 2011).

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