Sounding the Shofar—An Interview with Composer Meira Warshauer

BY JERRY DUBINS *Fanfare Magazine* September/October, 2011 Volume 35, Number

For those who may not be familiar with the name, Meira Warshauer is an American composer, born in Wilmington, North Carolina, who has devoted much of her creative output to Jewish themes and their universal message. A graduate of Harvard University (B.A. *magna cum laude),* New England Conservatory of Music (M.M. with honors), and the University of South Carolina (D.M.A.), she studied composition with Mario Davidovsky, Jacob Druckman, William Thomas McKinley, and Gordon Goodwin. She has served on the faculties of Columbia College, University of South Carolina Honors College, and as the Nancy A. Smith Distinguished Visitor at Coastal Carolina University. Warshauer's work *YES!* for clarinet and orchestra, written for and recorded by Richard Stoltzman and the Warsaw Philharmonic, received notice in three *Fanfare* reviews by William Zagorski and Lynn René Bayley in (31:5), and Patrick Rucker in 31:6.

While on the faculty of Columbia College, in Columbia, South Carolina, Warshauer created an innovative cross-cultural, multidisciplinary course on the experience of music as a source of healing. My interest in interviewing Warshauer was stirred by two recent releases, one on Albany, the other on Navona Records, both dedicated exclusively to her works. The Albany CD is the earlier of the two, dating back to 2007, and containing three significant works all based on Jewish themes. I began by asking Warshauer about this album, which takes its title, *Streams in the Desert,* from one of the pieces on the disc, because she has a very interesting story to tell about it.

A: I went to Bratislava because conductor Kirk Trevor had the relationship with the orchestra and chorus that made it possible to make this recording. His wife, Maria, who is Slovak and also a musician—she's the harpist with the Slovak Opera—helped negotiate the government music bureaucracy to make all the arrangements. She continued to hold everything together as needs arose during the recording period. Kirk really grasped the drama and emotion behind the music, and made it come alive in his conducting. When I met with him in Knoxville several years ago, he had some perceptive observations about the music, and I incorporated some of those suggestions when revising the music for the recording. Even during the sessions, Kirk made suggestions to improve the balance in a couple of places—I think Kirk's other calling is really music editor! The chorus was wonderful, and the director, Blanka Juhanakova, loved the music and really brought out the spiritual sensitivity and power of the text. Their Hebrew was great—they had worked with two Hebrew coaches before I arrived. They sang English very well, and after we worked on the spoken English, it also sounded good.

Q: How about the vocal soloists? What was your experience with them?

A: The soloists—Jennifer Hines, Stephanie Gregory, Michael Hendrick, and narrator Carol Potter—were all wonderful and really communicated the depth of the music and text. What added a special dimension to the project was the concert and live broadcast at Radio Hall. The orchestra and the chorus really connected with the music during the performance, and everyone was glowing at the end. We decided to add the concert when we realized the orchestra was receptive to presenting and broadcasting it. There had been a concert in Bratislava in 2004 by a Canadian Christian composer, Ruth Fazal, titled *Oratorio Terezin,* which had contributed to the process of facing the Jewish Holocaust of World War II in Slovakia. During Communism, no one had spoken of it, so education was important on a national level. I felt my music could offer a possible next step, presenting music from the Jewish liturgy that offers a message of love and justice, and a prayer for peace. Kirk titled the concert *Music from the Jewish Heart,* and I loved the title. It was especially moving to hear the narration for *Shacharit* in Slovak, and to know that these inspiring words were being heard in a new context by the radio audience and those in the hall.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have performances in many other countries, with narration in each language?!

Q: Something about Shacharit *struck a special chord in you. What was it?*

A: The day after the concert, Dinah Spritzer interviewed me about the music, and I recalled an image that had inspired me to keep going with this project: I saw the *kedushah* chant from *Shacharit,* "kadosh, kadosh, kadosh" (holy, holy, holy), enveloping the whole world in awareness of holiness. Michael Hendrick and I were talking about how to make the ending of *Shacharit* special; I said I hoped people, when hearing the end —'Oseh Shalom' (Grant Peace)—would love the feeling of peace in the music so much that they would want to keep it always. I believe music, if deeply felt, can create such an experience within the listener. It may awaken a place in us that we truly desire; it may inspire us to make that desire a reality in the world. I know that for me, as a composer, my work is to translate my deepest desires, my deepest prayers, into music, and I hope that the music we recorded in Bratislava will reach the hearts of many listeners, and that the prayers for peace, love, and justice that are contained in this music will be shared and expanded through our lives.

Q: Shacharit, *of course, is a work based on the liturgical service observed every weekday morning and expanded on the Sabbath and holy days. Your other choral/orchestral work on the disc,* Ahavah *(Love), also draws upon Biblical verses, but does not represent any particular ordered recurrent service. Can you explain the inspiration behind it and describe its musical content and character?*

A: For *Ahavah,* I have to start with the "tree story." I was teaching a class at a Jewish Renewal retreat on the campus of Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania in July 1991. I called the class "For as Long as the Heavens are Over the Earth." Our focus was studying Jewish texts about caring for the earth, and translating those ideas and our feelings into music. One afternoon, I was praying outside overlooking a lovely meadow. When I finished the afternoon prayer, I turned around and looked behind me, and noticed an old silver maple tree, with a trunk the size that would take three people to embrace! I walked close to it, put my arms around it as much as they could reach, looked up into her branches. I don't know why, but a question formed in my mind for this tree, and I asked if she had a song to teach me, not knowing what, if anything, to expect. Then, to my surprise, I perceived a distinct sound, a melody of three notes going up and three notes going down, with the word, *ahavah,* one note per syllable. I took out my notebook and wrote them down, knowing from experience that I could easily forget this gift, even though it seemed so simple. I even remember asking if there was more, saying "Thank you. That seems kinda short. Is there anything else?" Then I heard nothing. The message was finished. I was overcome with a feeling of love emanating from Creation, whispering secrets to us, if we only listen. I took this melody back to my class the next morning, we sang it together several times, and there was an amazing silence afterwards—a spontaneous meditative silence. We knew this was a powerful set of notes. For our presentation to the group at the end of the retreat, we put together some music using this chant, and when I returned home, I wanted to do something more with it—to help bring it to the rest of the world.

Q: So how did you and Nicholas Smith, then conductor of the South Carolina Philharmonic, hook up and decide on the direction your work would take?

A: When I returned to South Carolina, Nicholas invited me to write a piece for the orchestra's next season and I immediately suggested a choral symphony. We received some funding from the South Carolina Arts Commission, secured the collaboration of the Columbia Choral Society and mezzo-soprano soloist Jena Eison, and I started my work. I knew the word *ahavah* (love) was associated with the *Shema,* the affirmation of faith recited twice a day. In the traditional prayer book, the blessing before the *Shema* ends with the word *ahavah,* and the passage right after

Shema starts with *V'ahavta* (and you shall love)—kind of like a "love sandwich" around this most intimate promise—"Hear, O Israel, the Holy One is our God, the Holy One alone." And there is a strong connection to Jewish teachings on the environment in the very next paragraph, traditionally referred to as "the second paragraph after the *Shema,"* which is from Deut. 11. Arthur Waskow, of the Shalom Center, had been teaching that passage as a warning and a promise about caring for the earth.

Q: Yes, our custodial relationship of the planet—caring for all of its inhabitants, human and animal, and for its bounteous resources—is a recurrent theme in Judaism. How does this passage address that relationship?

A: The first part states that if we love God and follow the commandments, then the earth will be bountiful and sustain us, our fields, our animals, and we will be satisfied. The second part, starting with the word *Hishamru* (Beware), warns of going astray, of following alien impulses and desires, resulting in banishment from the good land we had been given. The last section of this paragraph, *v'Samtem et devarai ele al l'vavchem* (place these words on your heart), returns to the promise of fulfillment and plenty, if we only heed the call of love. It even ends with the words "for as long as the heavens are over the earth," which I am only now realizing was the title of my class at the retreat! That title was suggested by my friend Ruth Hirsch, when we were brainstorming about my proposal to teach at the retreat.

Q: How did you go about composing the piece—settling on form, structure, instrumentation, and so on?

A: I created a three-movement structure, reflecting the three parts of the process outlined in the text. It opens with a dramatic mezzo-soprano solo of *Shema,* foreshadowing the warning but ending softly. The chorus speaks *v'ahavta* (and you shall love) in English, and the soloist sings a gentle melody for the text in Hebrew —that half of the "love sandwich." I then let the chorus weave the tree's lovely six-note chant on the word *ahavah* throughout the first movement, titled *Shema v'ahavta* (Hear and Love), with a lush orchestra portraying the promise of fullness and plenty. The second movement, *Hishamru* (Beware), takes its text and character from the warning section, and was the most difficult to write, emotionally. I had to face the prophecy, "You shall die" or "You will be lost or banished." The music is dissonant, angular, and percussive. I revised that section before this recording, adding some of the text that had scared me away before. The last movement, "Place These Words," is in English, my translation and interpretation of the last section of the passage. It's really a song for the soloist, with the chorus reprising the *ahavah* chant. I hope it sounds reassuring and comforting, and creates in us a desire to do what is needed in order to receive the blessing of generations living on this land "for as long as the heavens are over the earth."

Q: A third piece on the CD, Like Streams in the Desert, *is strictly orchestral, though it, too, I understand, has strong religious and spiritual resonance for you. I read that you wrote it for the 50th anniversary of the state of Israel in 1998, and that it celebrates the idea of* aliyah, *coming home, physically to the land of Israel, and on the spiritual level, to our true, whole, and holy selves. The piece was commissioned and premiered by the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, but I'm wondering if it has ever been performed in Israel. I understand that you found musical source material for the work in the Sound Archives collection of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem while on a six-week residency in Israel, and that your inspiration for the piece came from Psalm 126, whose theme is the return of exiles to Zion. But there are elements of Middle Eastern and North African music and even a reference to Gregorian chant that you incorporated into the score. Can you explain a bit more about the sources you drew upon and how you wove them together into this very rich musical tapestry?*

A: This piece has not yet been performed in Israel, although it has been broadcast at least twice

on Israeli radio. In 1997, when I was commissioned to write music for the 50th anniversary of Israel's statehood, I received funding from Hillel at the University of South Carolina to spend six weeks in Israel. In looking for my theme, I was very moved by the ingathering of Jews from so many parts of the world, and felt this would be something to celebrate. One day, I was on the bus and sat next to an older man. By then, my Hebrew was almost good enough to carry on a simple conversation. I asked how long he had lived in Jerusalem, and he said his whole life! Knowing a little of the changes which had taken place in the city during the 20th century, I asked him how it felt to live through that. He responded, "It was like a dream." I immediately thought of the text of Psalm 126, which says "We were as dreamers," in referring to the return of exiles. And that we sing that Psalm at the end of festival and Sabbath meals. At the Sound Archives of the Hebrew University, there is a wonderful collection of recordings, made as communities returned to Israel, literally returning from exile. There were many different versions of Psalm 126, since it had been sung at festive meals in every community. I selected three that I thought would represent the diversity of the Jewish experience, and also work well together musically, from Greece (Salonika), Morocco, and Yemen. In the last section of the piece, I wanted to widen the circle to universalize the theme of return from exile. Jewish tradition teaches that we are all in spiritual exile, and that our souls yearn to return to the source of holiness. There are brief references to a Gregorian chant, *Jerusalem et Judaea,* a Persian melody for *Adon Olam* (Ruler of the Universe), and chimes representing church bells.

Q: Turning now to your more recent album for Navona Records, titled Living Breathing Earth, *I have to say that I'm absolutely fascinated and blown away (no pun intended) by your* Tekeeyah, *the first ever concerto for shofar. For our readers who may be unfamiliar with the instrument, the shofar is the hollowed horn of a ram that is blown (sounded) throughout the High Holidays season. Symbolically, it represents the appearance of the ram in the thicket as Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Assuming one can manage to sound any note on it at all, it's alleged that its blast can be heard at great distances, and that in ancient times it was blown on the ramparts to sound alarms or to announce the onset of festivals and the* rosh chodesh *(the monthly observance of the new moon). Today, the shofar is blown in synagogues around the world during Rosh Hashanah (New Year's) services. If Oscar Levant called the oboe an ill wind that no one blows any good, I can't imagine what he would have said about the shofar. My own experience with seeing and hearing it sounded in the synagogue is that the shofar blower usually turns red in the face and nearly has a stroke trying to get the thing to sound at all, and usually what comes out are several sputtering, splattering, squealing noises before he finally produces a steady but short blast. It takes enormous wind pressure to make the shofar sound, and when it finally does, more often than not, it sounds like a cat in heat. Moreover, the usually volunteer shofar blowers I've heard in the synagogue, if they're lucky, manage to squeeze no more than two or three distinct pitches out of the instrument. So, when I saw the words "first-ever concerto for shofar," I couldn't help but burst out laughing. Please tell me: How does one write a concerto for shofar? How many pitches is it actually capable of producing? And where does one find a practiced, professional shofar blower to play it? Obviously, you found such a person in shofar soloist Haim Avitsur.*

A: You're right, the shofar is a very hard horn to blow! There is no mouthpiece on this completely natural animal horn. The only preparation is cleaning and hollowing out the inside. There are, of course, no finger holes for different pitches—everything is produced by the embouchure of the player, and most people do well to produce one or two pitches. Knowing this limitation, I decided I would need an auxiliary instrument, in this case, the trombone, to augment the pitch world of the soloist. I was lucky to find Haim Avitsur, a wonderful virtuoso trombonist, who loves to blow the shofar. We were on the same program in Hickory, North Carolina, when my Symphony No. 1, "Living Breathing Earth" received its world premiere with the Western Piedmont Symphony. I asked Haim if he would be interested in collaborating on a concerto for shofar and trombone, and

he was very excited about the idea! Haim and I got together a few times in New York, and tried out various shofarot (plural of shofar), to see which one might work best. We settled on the horn of an African antelope on loan to Haim by the Lemberger family. It's like a Steinway of shofarot. The sound is beautiful and clear, and it has tremendous carrying power. This shofar has two primary pitches: E above middle C, and the C a sixth above that. Haim then started working with the shofar to see if he could coax more pitches from it. He found he could make a glissando down from the E as far as the A, a fifth below, and could extend up from the E, almost a major third. The E itself could be any dynamic, from *pp* to *ff.* The high C of the shofar did not have that flexibility. It is strong, loud, and unbending.

Q: In listening to the concerto, I notice that the shofar part is fairly circumscribed, being limited mainly to rhythmic fanfare like interjections on one or two notes. Given what I know of the instrument, it's what I would have expected. I mean I wasn't really expecting you to write a soaring, lyrical melody for it. But what I also know about how difficult and unpredictable it is in "speaking" precisely when you want it to, I was amazed at how right on cue Avitsur is. Did you consult with him while you were working on the piece to determine what was possible and practical?

A: I was in constant consultation with Haim. He approached the piece like an athlete, training the muscles of the face for endurance and predictability. The E was not so much of a problem. It's the high C that really tires the facial muscles (from what I understand). I wrote several *ossia* parts for other instruments—trumpets and orchestral trombones—to relieve him, if necessary, especially toward the end, when we have so many high Cs. It turned out, though, that he really didn't need most of the *ossias.*

Q: About your other work on this disc, the Symphony No. 1, "Living Breathing Earth," from which the album takes its title, I must warn you in advance that the first movement, "Call of the Cicadas," really freaked me out, but that's because I have a phobia of insects. As long as they stay outside, I'm OK, but any creepy, crawly thing that gets inside my house is quickly dispatched by an extra large can of Raid I keep at the ready. Lucky for me, I don't live in a part of the country that's hospitable to cicadas, but listening to the imitation of them in your score had me close to spraying the room. And speaking of your score, which is accessible on the enhanced CD (more on this later in my review below), I couldn't help but notice the large forces you employ. For those who may not choose to play the disc on their computers, can you describe the instrumentation of the piece and how you achieve these all-too-real effects?

A: I really had fun with this movement. I discovered that if I played my violin (I have one just for trying things out) in a tremolo behind the bridge, I could get a sound that resembled the white noise and rhythms of the cicadas. It doesn't sound great with one violin, but with a whole section, I think it really sounds cool. I had the first violins tremolo behind the bridge on the A string, the second violins on the D string, and the violas on their A string. That, combined with the sizzle cymbal, a high cluster of repeated 32nd notes in the three piccolos, two clarinets (one on the higher E ♭ -clarinet), and xylophone gave me a sound approximating

the chorus of cicadas. Supporting this energy were sustained harmonics in the lower strings, high bending notes in the bassoons, and a chirping sound in the piano and muted trumpet. And that's just the opening. When I realized I could treat the whole orchestra like it was a giant cicada (I asked myself, "What would the cicada do if he had a whole orchestra to play?"), lots of possibilities opened up for translating this energy to the exciting forces available with a large orchestra.

Q: The entire work is really a sort of nature symphony, isn't it? The cicadas are only a part of it—the first movement—but you were inspired by a canoe trip on the Tahuayo River in the Peruvian

rainforest, the balletic dance of butterflies, soaring birds, the reflection of sunlight on the water, and in the last movement, as you put it, "the earth's breath and her majestic rotation." But there's more to your symphony than the diversity and beauty of life in all its forms; underlying it—and not very far beneath the surface—is a dire warning of looming environmental disaster, of disappearing species, pollution, and the despoiling of the planet at the hands of the human race. Music, of course, can mimic sounds that occur in nature. But philosophically—and this is a philosophical question—do you believe it's possible for music to raise our consciousness to these issues and inspire us to acts of goodwill?

A: Yes. I do believe that. Especially in this piece, as well as in *Tekeeyah* (A Call), I am hoping the music can lead us back toward what we hold most precious. With the symphony, I tried to put my love of the earth, with its amazing diversity and awesome beauty, into the music. I hope the symphony can help remind us of how much we love the earth. I thought, if I can make it beautiful enough, maybe we will remember. If something touches us deeply, we do remember. When we get back to that core of love, we really don't want to leave it. (Just like in *Ahavah* from the other disc.) And there is a better chance we will want to take care of what we love. With the last movement of the symphony, also titled "Living Breathing Earth," I wanted us to breathe with the earth, to breathe with each other, and to feel how all life is one giant organism, both physically, and I believe spiritually. But the reason I wrote the shofar and trombone concerto is that I know how hard it is to change. We are wedded to our habits, even if they are destructive, and even if we want to change them. I was hoping the shofar, which is used in the Jewish tradition to wake up the soul and whose sound can penetrate to the core, would help us wake up. That last long high C, which goes on for much longer than one person could sustain as it is passed among shofar, trumpet, and trombone, alludes to the *shofar gadol,* the great shofar, which calls from the depths to all humanity to lift us beyond our perceived limitations into our true potential for good. I know music alone can't change the world. But I do believe it can help take us to our inner truth. And every time we connect to that deep place inside, that place of truth and love, we come closer to living from there. And that's where change comes from.

Q: Both of these albums contain music that evokes powerful emotions and that, in the case of the shofar concerto, is certainly unique. What are you working on now? What projects are in the pipeline?

A: I just wrote a two-movement piece called *Seascapes I and II* for chamber winds, commissioned and premiered this spring by the Coastal Carolina Chamber Winds, as part of the Nancy A. Smith Distinguished Visitor series. I grew up by the beach and have had a lifelong love affair with the ocean, the source of inspiration for what may become a series of *Seascapes*. *Seascapes I and II* are playful and light, and, I hope, express the joy and exhilaration of being by the sea. But like so many of us, I've become increasingly concerned about the health of the oceans, which we have treated like an infinite resource until now. In the next work, I'm anticipating something deeper—getting in touch with the ocean calling—another call from the depths. I'm in the planning stages with two amazing pianists, Marina Lomazov and Joseph Rackers, for a two-piano composition for them to perform in 2012.