

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, “Tekeyah” • Peter Vronsky, cond; Haim Avitsur (shofar, tbn); Moravian PO • NAVONA 5842 (50:58)

I first encountered Meira Warshauer’s music back in 1994 while reviewing, for *Fanfare*, a multicomposer release on the MMC label titled *Robert Black Conducts*. Her contribution was an eight-minute orchestral piece titled *Revelation*. 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. Only the truly lasting stuff gains in power through time. My second encounter came three years ago. Again it was via a *Fanfare* review of another MMC multicomposer offering. It was titled *Perspectives*, and her piece, *Yes!*, was a *tour de force* for clarinet and orchestra. Full of pop and jazz inflections and quotoids (I hope I’ve just coined a word), I found its sheer playfulness infectious and came away admiring the stylistic scope of her apparently ever-expandable musical language. Despite the vastly different aims and consequent demands of each piece, her distinctive voice was always unmistakably clear.

And now, given these two discs of major works by Warshauer, I not only see her more in the round, but can detect a line of progression in her art. The major work on the Albany disc, *Shacharit*, is her setting of the Sabbath Morning Service. Composed in 1989 as her doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Gordon Goodwin and Mario Davidovsky, and with guidance from Jacob Druckman and Samuel Adler, its required forces are large—soprano, tenor, narrator, chorus, and full symphony orchestra with augmented percussion. In 10 sections, it takes 35 minutes in this performance. In it the melismatic contours of cantorial singing are merged with its largely diatonic language and the results are mutually reinforcing. The alternations between English and Hebrew, and the brief moments illuminated by the narrator, raise this piece from the specific to the universal. In my fantasy world, I can only imagine what Ernest Bloch would say upon hearing it.

Like Streams in the Desert, composed in 1998 for the celebration of Israel's 50th anniversary, is purely orchestral and is inspired by Psalm 126, which sings of "the return of exiles to Zion." In her striving to make the Jewish experience a universal one, Warshauer metaphorically opens the piece with a plaintive Salonikan Greek melody—a call of a lover for her beloved from afar. From there the music evolves into moments of conflict alternating with those of hope. In structure, it is a theme-and-variations scheme culminating in a moment of troubled joy. The orchestration is simpler and less colorful than that of *Shacharit*, but the piece is rendered more tellingly thereby.

Ahavah (Love), composed four years earlier, reverts more to the language and forces of *Shacharit*. It is a grand choral work for mezzo-soprano, chorus, and orchestra that proclaims the profound connection between ourselves and the earth upon which we stand—the source of our existence, nurturing, and, ultimately, demise—connecting us to something far greater than the mere historical evolutions of our earthly empires, past and present, and all their temporally earthly preoccupations.

These performances, conducted by the ubiquitous Kirk Trevor, are typically splendid. In a world where name soloists abound, these folks are far from known. They are, however, technically impeccable by the most stringent of standards, and produce inspired and inspiring performances. Soundwise, the disc is fine.

The Navona disc, titled after the subtitle of Warshauer's Symphony No. 1 as *Living Breathing Earth*, shows at once a simplification of, and more complex stage in, Warshauer's musical evolution. I find it harmonically more direct than the works on the Albany release, but, orchestration-wise, far more variegated and kaleidoscopic. The underlying theme of the symphony—the exquisite delicacy, and vulnerability, of the earth's life support systems—is metaphorically depicted by the essential act of breathing. Periodic repetitions, both harmonic and rhythmic, abound throughout its four deeply interrelated movements. The first, titled "Call of the Cicadas," presents the riot of ever-renewing insect life found in the Carolina or Georgia summer; the second, "Tahuayo River at Night," is a gentle barcarole set in the Peruvian rainforest; the third, "Wings in Flight," depicts the playful flight of butterflies at water's edge and the soaring birds above; and the fourth, "Living

Breathing Earth,” is slow, measured, and seemingly timeless. It soars majestically, but brings the symphony to an unsettling, indeed questioning, close.

Any competent biologist will attest to the fact that all earthly life support systems are inextricably interdependent and fragile. Yet we are all too ready and willing to destroy life through our ongoing pollution of our earth and its atmosphere, and to destroy our tropical rainforests, one of our primary sources of life-sustaining oxygen, in the interest of our geopolitical supremacy and economic prosperity—an unquenchable, not to mention unsustainable, quest for short-term gain at the long-term cost of life itself. So what, in the end, is of real value?

In her notes to this release, Warshauer ties her ecological message to that of her Jewish heritage. *Tekeyah* (in Hebrew, *A Call*) is a concerto for shofar (alternating with the trombone) and orchestra. Here is, once again, a mix of the timeless and the modern. Each of us has an inborn calling, whether we, from time to time, recognize it or not. It defines us, and provides us with a sense of who and what we are on the infinite space-time continuum. This unprecedented concerto, started by Warshauer in 2008 while she was a fellow at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, is full of moments of questioning, longing, and exultation. Its orchestration is delicately deft and full of sonic tints, and like her Symphony No. 1, it ends in a harmonically ambivalent way—appropriate for music that, like the universe, has neither beginning nor end.

Haim Avitsur, who plays both the shofar and trombone and who provided technical assistance during the concerto’s gestation, acquits himself admirably on a shofar culled from an African antelope. The Moravian Philharmonic under Petr Vronsky provides heartfelt advocacy. Special kudos are in order for its principal trumpet. The sound is detailed, resonant, and given the demands of the music, fully satisfying.

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