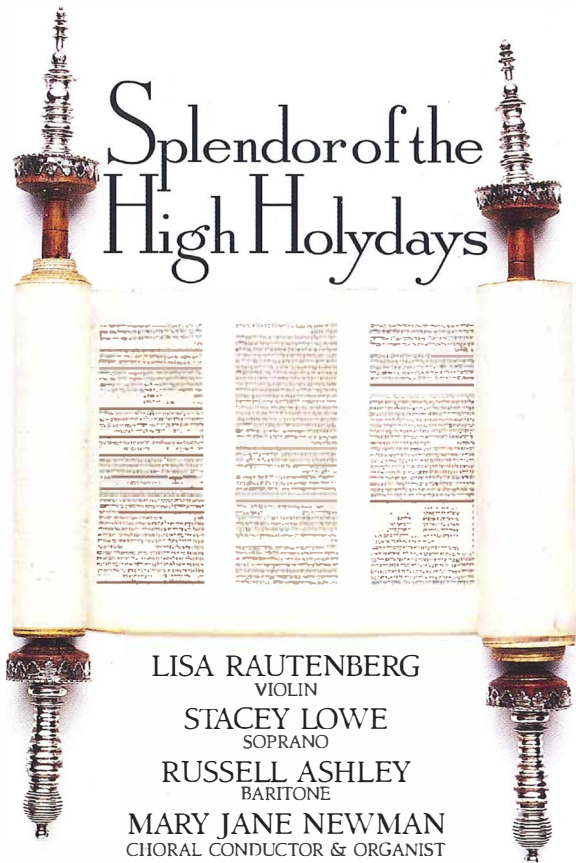




VOX 7510

Splendor of the High Holydays



LISA RAUTENBERG
VIOLIN

STACEY LOWE
SOPRANO

RUSSELL ASHLEY
BARITONE

MARY JANE NEWMAN
CHORAL CONDUCTOR & ORGANIST

In the midst of Judaism lies a great treasure. It speaks to the soul of every Jew and resonates with the precious essence that is Judaism itself. That treasure is the music of the Jewish tradition. Nowhere is this music as splendidly put forth as in the services of the high holydays. This disc seeks to open the doors of the synagogue, not only to Jews, but to the entire musical world. We seek to present here two somewhat paradoxical, yet perfectly consonant experiences: the music of the days of awe in a context which reflects the profound spiritual journey that takes place in the synagogue and in the life of Jews throughout the world during this holy period, and, to open this experience, at least on an artistic level, to lover's of music, of beauty, and of holiness. In serving the ends of the latter goal, the music on this disc is arranged in a way which is somewhat different from the synagogue experience. To engage in a musical metaphor, we have made an effort to transpose the emotion, the very life of the services themselves, into a context which will both move the heart of the religious Jew, familiar with these tunes from the synagogue, and to introduce this music to a broader audience, in a somewhat "concertised" version.

As it is said: "With trumpets and the sound of the Shofar acclaim the Sovereign Lord." (Psalm 98.6) and so this disc opens with the traditional herald of the high holydays, the blasts of the shofar, calling the people to a "holy convocation". The custom of blowing the shofar, a natural wind instrument, dates from the time of the First Temple and is the only instrument that retained its position in the synagogue throughout the Middle Ages up to the present. It is blown each day for the entire month of Elul to remind Jews everywhere that the days of awe are upon them and that they must examine their lives, their goals, their actions before God. Each of the three blasts are sounded here: tekia, shevarim, terua! It is interesting to note that at one time in Jewish history, the number of blasts of the shofar to be sounded on Rosh Hashanah was one hundred. This tradition was rooted in the Rabbinic prescription that one should recite one hundred blessings each day, being mindful of the great blessing which is one's life.

The “Avinu Malkeinu” is perhaps the most famous melody of the high holiday services. It is sung by the congregation at services throughout the period of the days of awe. Its solemn, chant-like texture is hypnotically entrancing and sets one’s spirit on wings to a place of sacred remembrance. The text is a supplication to God, who is referred to in the prayer as “Father” and “King”. The text is, “Our Father, our King, be gracious and answer us, for we have little merit. Treat us generously and with kindness and be our help.” It is performed here in a setting for voices and organ. Around the beginning of the Common Era allusions to the “Magrepha” (pipe-organ) appear. We have used the pipe organ on this disc as the dominant instrument for accompaniment. This choice is well within the bounds of tradition, as Semitic-Oriental musical notions view instrumental music as acceptable for accompaniment and embellishment. Closer to us historically is the reemergence of the organ in the synagogues of Germany in the early nineteenth century. Israel Jacobson’s synagogue in Seesen installed an organ in 1810. This schule also gave birth to the first Jewish organist of modern times, Gerson Rosenstein (1790-1851). In this synagogue, a mixed choir, much as the one heard on this disc, would sing music in four parts. Vocal music, through its intimate connection with text, was the predominant form of Jewish musical expression.

This setting of the “Zachraynu L’chayim” begins with its hauntingly beautiful melody played by the violin. The music gives voice to the plea of the prayer itself: “Remember us unto life, O King who delights in life; inscribe us in the book of life for your sake, O God of life.”

These first three pieces contain radiant bits of the luminous golden threads which weave their way through the high holiday services, offering to us a glimpse of the holy.

We continue on with very different musical settings of the prayers, “Tiku Va Chodesh,” “Shema Kolenu” and “Adonai, Adonai” – all three being well known parts of the traditional service. “Tiku Va Chodesh” has been set to a melody by Handel from the oratorio “Samson”. The “Shema Kolenu” is a setting by Rabbi David Greenberg, a profoundly moving contemporary version of this prayer. The final portion of this piece is the traditional setting of the “Hashivenu”.

The disc contains three pieces from Mendelssohn's "Elijah" which are thematically and textually appropriate to the spirit of the high holydays. The famous and moving tenor aria "Then shall the righteous shine forth" evokes many of the themes of the high holyday season. Historically, Jews have preferred a lyric tenor voice with its powers to move the heart. This aria reaches to the soul of this Eastern European "chazzan" tradition. The bass aria "For the Mountains Shall Depart" is taken from a Psalm text used during the service for Rosh Hashana morning.

The great composer of the Reform movement, Louis Lewandowski, is represented here by many of his most moving and characteristic compositions. Lewandowski was the first 'choirmaster' in Jewish history. Until the time of his appointment at the Community Synagogue in Berlin, choirs had been under the leadership of the chazzan. In style and harmony, Lewandowski was greatly influenced by the genius of Felix Mendelssohn. His "Tzadik Katamar," on the text "The righteous shall flourish," is set here for violin and chorus with soprano descant. It is one of the most beautiful melodies of the Reform tradition and reveals as well as any piece in this collection, the spiritual richness, the extraordinary height and depth of Jewish music.

The traditional blessings for Rosh Hashana evening are interspersed with a contemporary setting of "Ahavat Olam," followed by a series of well known pieces from the services, the "Etz Chayim Hi," the "B'Rosh Hashanan" and the "Mi 'Kamocho", set somewhat traditionally for choir and cantonal soloist with organ accompaniment.

In the service for Yom Kippur afternoon, the twenty-third psalm is sung during the memorial section, toward the close of the service. It is sung here in a simple setting by Dvořák for soprano and organ.

The high point of this disc, amid the many musical treasures contained in this collection (and, perhaps, the high point of the services from a musical point of view), is the transcendent "Kol Nidrei" ("All Vows"). The, "Kol Nidrei" is an ancient prayer dating from the eleventh century, and associated with the atrocities of the Spanish Inquisition. The prayer is addressed to God

by those Jews, referred to historically as ‘Marranos,’ who were forced into outward compliance with Christianity. The other option was to lose their lives or, at the very least, their freedom and to put in jeopardy the lives and fortunes of their families and those close to them. These Jews continued to secretly practice Judaism in their homes and within their families. The “Kol Nidrei” was their plea for forgiveness for these acts of disloyalty in the taking of oaths that were not heartfelt or truly meant. The first mention of a recognized melody for this prayer is found in a commentary by Rabbi Jaffa of Prague dated 1610. The oldest written version dates from 1765 and is by Ahron Beer. It is this version that inspired Lewandowski and Bruch. “Kol Nidrel” is presented here in three versions: one for solo violin, the traditional vocal version in the Lewandowski setting, sung here by soprano, and the superb violin setting by Max Bruch. The decision to present the piece, though in different versions, three times, was based on the traditional three repetitions - the first for latecomers; the motivation for the second repetition is taken from Jewish legal tradition which states that to be released from a vow, a rabbinic court must declare three times that one is released. Here, in the “Kol Nidrei” one finds the most ‘concert-like’ departure from what one would traditionally hear in the synagogue. However, because of the musical majesty of this piece it was thought that these elaborate settings would more brilliantly present the “Kol Nidrei” to a large, diverse audience.

The disc ends with an arrangement of the “Adon Olam,” which is the closing hymn of the service. It is set on a chorus by Handel. This is a copy of similar settings of Handel by Nisson Blumenthal, the first modern chazzan in Russia. As did Blumenthal, I found that the majestic Handel setting fits well the conclusion of so significant a collection both in musical and, perhaps, more importantly, in spiritual terms. It is our hope that this presentation will inspire those who already have a great love of this tradition, and reach out to those who have yet to experience the extraordinary riches of heart and spirit which are touched and opened by this great musical treasure.

—*Mary Jane Newman*



Mary Jane Newman, choral conductor & organist, during studies with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, began her passionate relationship with the music of the 16th and 17th centuries as an assistant to Mlle. Boulanger's Monteverdi Ensemble. While a student at the Conservatoire National in Paris, she was organist at the English Church on Avenue Hoche.

In past seasons, Ms. Newman has appeared with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, with Gerard Schwarz and the Madeira Bach Orchestra, the Brandenburg Collegium, and with such noted soloists as Eugenia Zuckerman, Julianne Baird, The New York Philharmonic Brass, The New York Trumpet Ensemble and Anthony Newman.

She has recorded the Bach double harpsichord concertos with Anthony Newman and the Brandenburg Collegium, and the Alessandro Scarlatti

"Mass In Honor Of St. Cecilia", as conductor of the Collegium Antiquum.

Recently, she also performed as a harpsichord soloist with the Cracow Chamber Orchestra, the Israel Philharmonic, the Virginia Symphony, as well as solo recitals and sold-out performances with the Collegium Antiquum at Carnegie Recital Hall, New York. Ms. Newman is music director at Temple Shaaray-Tefila in Bedford, N.Y., and an active proponent of Jewish music.

Lisa Rautenberg, violin soloist, gave her New York debut at the 1989 Mostly Mozart Festival. She also appeared with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and she is concertmistress of the Brandenburg Collegium, Concert Royal, the Collegium Antiquum, and the Mozartean Players. She has recorded for several major record labels, and she has been a featured soloist with the Brandenburg Collegium at Carnegie Hall and Boston's Symphony Hall.

Baritone Russell Ashley has performed as guest soloist with many fine ensembles including the Gregg Smith Singers, the Robert DeCormier Singers and the New York Jewish Male Chorus. He is currently baritone soloist at Sutton Place Synagogue. He has toured Europe, the Far East, Canada and the U.S. Mr. Ashley appears regularly with the National Grand Opera and the Metropolitan Opera.

Stacey Lowe, soprano, a native New Yorker, has appeared with major opera companies in the New York area. She has performed the role of Queen of the Night in Mozart's "The Magic Flute," Donna Anna in "Don Giovanni" and Ariadne in Strauss' "Ariadne auf Naxos." This past season, Ms. Lowe performed at Caramoor and was a featured soloist in Handel's "Messiah" and Mozart's "Requiem". She studied at the Oberlin Conservatory and is a cantorial soloist at Temple Shaaray Tefila in Bedford, New York.

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Recorded at S.U.N.Y. At Purchase in 1995 by Mary Jane Newman, Anthony Newman &

Stephan J. Epstein; Digital Editing & Mastering: Stephan J. Epstein, Stamford Digital

Cover Design: Bob DeRin

Vox Classics Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. Printed in the U.S.A.

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