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Celebrating the American Spirit

By Magda Katz

This Thanksgiving we can be thankful for being able to have our voices heard in a free election. Released October 30, 2012, *Celebrating the American Spirit* is a new CD performed by Essential Voices USA, conducted by Judith Clurman, composed/arranged by Larry Hochman and stars Broadway's Kelli O'Hara and Ron Raines. The centerpiece of this CD is "Sing Out, Mr. President," a song cycle of sixteen newly commissioned compositions set to quotations by American presidents from Washington to Obama.

Judith Clurman has conducted and collaborated with world-renowned orchestras, dance companies, and music festivals, including the New York Philharmonic, The Boston Symphony, New York City Ballet, Lincoln Center's Great Performers series, Jazz at Lincoln Center and the New York Pops on their Carnegie Hall subscription series. She created and conducts the Lincoln Center Tree Lighting and has worked as the Associated Music Director for "Sesame Street." Her work with the Muppets earned her a 2009 Emmy nomination for Outstanding Achievement in Music Direction and Composition.

Larry Hochman has won four Emmy Awards for his original music on the TV series "The Wonder Pets" and a Tony and Drama Desk Award for his orchestrations for *The Book of Mormon*. He won Tony nods for Best Orchestrations with *Monty Python's Spamalot*, *The Scottsboro Boys*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *A Class Act*. He orchestrates for the best in the business, with Audra McDonald, Hugh Jackman, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Eric Idle, Barry Manilow, Marvin Hamlisch, Mandy Patinkin, Betty Buckley and Sir Paul McCartney. Larry and Judy met because of Marvin Hamlisch. "Marvin actually recommended me to Judy, before this project. What Judy didn't know at the time, was my daughter Lori, when she was 8 years old, had written a song using the words of the Pledge of Alliance, setting it to music." This collaboration was serendipitous.

Celebrating the American Spirit has been in the works for 10 years. It began when Ms. Clurman conducted the Julliard Choral Union at the firehouse on West 68th Street and Amsterdam Ave after 9/11. "After the choir sang 'America The Beautiful,' firemen came over to me and put their head on my shoulder and we all started crying together," states Ms Clurman. "I knew then that I wanted to do an Americana recording. I commissioned 12 friends to write lyrics to the Presidential texts. 16 Presidents are included. We performed a part of this in celebration of the presidency at the Library of Congress right before the 2004 election. In that original cycle, we used the words of presidents who were no longer alive. We couldn't insult anybody. As the cycle developed, we added presidents who are still living. 'There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America,' are my favorite words. Next we were recorded for broadcast on National Public Radio and were on the entire month of February. Now we have a CD. We're encouraging people to purchase the CD, because the notes are wonderfully written by Carol Loge and impart a great deal of information."

On the CD, Kelli O'Hara stands out doing "Take Care of This House" and "God Bless America," while Ron Raines sings "It Gets Lonely in the White House," something we never think of.

