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A Musical Mix of Old and New: Judith Clurman's *Cherished Moments: Songs of the Jewish Spirit*

Posted: 11/17/2014 6:54 pm EST Updated: 11/17/2014 6:54 pm EST



[Essential Voices USA](#) conductor Judith Clurman started work on her CD, *Cherished Moments: Songs of the Jewish Spirit*, several years ago, but the project really began when she was a little girl in synagogue. "The music is a combination of traditional melodies that I've known since childhood and music that I have personally commissioned or arranged during the past ten years," Clurman said in a recent interview. The CD was released on October 28th on the [Sono Luminus](#) label.

As a member of Clurman's Essential Voices USA (though not a singer on the CD) and someone who also grew up with many of these melodies, I have a personal connection to the music. I delighted in a choral arrangement of the late Debbie Friedman's "Oseh Shalom," a favorite tune of mine from synagogue, here arranged for chorus, piano and clarinet by Sally Lamb McClune. Though the CD stems from Clurman's own background and many will find the music familiar, the 14 tracks of traditional holiday melodies and contemporary settings are for all listeners regardless of their religion.

Not only does the CD boast music in languages from English to Hebrew to Yiddish but the composers and arrangers form an eclectic group as well. Tony-winning performer Brian Stokes Mitchell arranged "Songs of Freedom: A Celebration of Chanukah" with Clurman and Larry Hochman, also a Tony-winning orchestrator for numerous Broadway shows. The contemporary classical composer Nico Muhly (last season's *Two Boys* at the Metropolitan Opera), contributes a beautiful setting of "Set Me as a Seal." Clurman purposely chose both composers of the past, such as 19th century composers Emanuel Kirschner and Louis Lewandowski, and current ones, seeing that mixture of the old and the new as another reflection of the Jewish spirit.



Members of Essential Voices USA

The liner notes divide the songs into "holidays" and "life cycle" events -- there are songs for Chanukah, the High Holy Days, Passover and the Sabbath, as well as for birth, marriage and death -- but the track order doesn't follow any categorization. "The CD is designed for people to listen to as a whole," Clurman said. "I believe that the selections fit neatly together, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle."

The CD begins with Lewandowski's "Enosh," one of Clurman's favorite pieces, which establishes the lush, full sound of both the chorus and orchestra. From Kirschner's "Tzadik Katamar" (arranged by Hochman) to Paul Schoenfield's setting of "Al Hanisim" (commissioned by Clurman and her sister in memory of their parents), the chorus brings out the beauty in the lilting and often haunting melodic lines.

One of the highlights of the CD is the Chanukah suite "Songs of Freedom: A Celebration of Chanukah" that premiered at Carnegie Hall in 2010 with Mitchell as the soloist. The piece comprises the Yiddish folk song "Oh Chanukah, Oh Chanukah!," the dreidl tune "S'vivon," "Lichvod Ha Chanukah" (sung by the wonderful Ron Raines), the battle march "Mi Y'malel," "Haneirot Halalu," and "Maoz Tsur." Each movement takes a simple, often familiar melody and adds remarkable layers.

There are three soloists throughout the CD -- Raines, Michael Slattery and cantor Bruce Ruben, who is also Clurman's husband. Clurman wanted to include a modern cantorial sound and Ruben, also a composer, has a piece on the CD as well -- "Circle of Life," arranged by Hochman. Slattery lovingly provides the solo for "V'erastich Li," Canadian composer Ben Steinberg's 1973 setting, which was also sung at Clurman and Ruben's wedding ceremony.



Essential Voices USA conductor Judith Clurman

Instrumental tracks are interspersed among the choral pieces, adding a different texture. "I love change of color and the simplicity," Clurman said. "One of the pieces is a melody that my father loved singing in synagogue during the High Holy Days. I have included it as my personal tribute to him." Those familiar with the High Holy Day service will recognize "M'chalkeil Chayim," here arranged for violin and clarinet by Ruben. The melody was written by Solomon Braslavsky, a Boston musical director and organist and early influence on Leonard Bernstein. The Passover Seder opener "Kadeish Ur'chatz" appears as a violin solo, and Clurman arranged "Han'Shama Lach," also from the High Holy Days service Selichot, for violin and clarinet.

Whether the listener is familiar with the melodies or experiencing them for the first time, *Cherished Moments: Songs of the Jewish Spirit* affirms that this music and liturgy, which has lasted for centuries, still resonates today and will evolve with each generation. For Clurman, the music that endures honors the words. "In the best of all possible worlds, the composer should always start with the text," she said. "Whether he or she is writing a folk or art song, music or opera, sacred or secular song, the text should be as strong as the music and vice versa. Then you have a piece of music that will sustain the test of time."

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