

NEW YORK CONCERT SINGERS
Divine Grandeur

New World Records 80504

American composers are noted for their curiosity about the world and distant cultures, and this is never more true than when they seek inspiration for music of a spiritual nature. Each of the seven composers on this recording has a distinct style of his or her own, and yet one can hear, in these meditative yet impassioned choral works, the life of faraway places shaping their music.

In Sephardic Jewish ritual, the prayer *Eil Nora Alilab*, attributed to Moses ibn Ezra, introduces the closing service of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Simon Sargon, music director of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, Texas, has written that he tried, in his setting of the poem, "to capture the sense of human frailty and God's awesome majesty which this service and its unique mood bring home so powerfully." The piece's distinctive melodic feature is an often repeated, slightly hesitant phrase that seems to reach upward in supplication. Although the dynamics swell to *forte* in the middle, the mood remains prayerful throughout.

For his substantial setting of Psalm 119, Robert Beaser divided the original text into three main sections; the music is gently flowing in the outer sections, *scherzando* in the middle, and deftly contrapuntal throughout. Occasionally a solo line varies the choral texture. The coda, an extended setting of *Alleluia*, is itself in three parts. This piece was commissioned in 1983 by the publishing firm of Alexander Broude, Inc., to commemorate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the State of Israel. The composer, who heads the composition faculty at The Juilliard School, revised the piece in 1996 for this recording.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich begins *Thanksgiving Song* with what appears to be an exultant fanfare for piano, but which then becomes a stately accompaniment with a persistent "snap" rhythm. Zwilich gives a cheerful text a rather spare and meditative setting, especially when remembering the less fortunate and the departed. The piece was written in 1987 for Ithaca College.

Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord by Aaron Jay Kernis favors clear, homophonic delivery of the text. Composed in 1984 for the Church of the Redeemer Choir (Gayle Kirkwood, director), it is distinguished by the organ's long-pedal (held) notes and rocking accompaniment figure, and by its blossoming into lush choral harmonies midway through the piece.

Stephen Paulus' *Meditations of Li Po*, commissioned by Linda and Jack Hoeschler in honor of Betty Musser and written in 1994, sets the delicate, elliptical lines of the great Chinese poet (701-762) in a rich choral texture divided into as many as eight parts. Rather than imitate Chinese music, Paulus translates these texts into a spiritual American idiom, set either in straightforward speech rhythms or (more often) in long-sustained chords built of fifths, fourths, and tenths. He introduces his effects with the greatest delicacy--a *glissando* here, the piquant dissonance of a minor second there--and he does so not to "illustrate" this or that word in the text, but rather to create a vocal metaphor for the feelings behind the words. In this context, even the discreet addition of handbells in the work's closing bars, evoking temple bells, sounds startlingly explicit.

Judith Shatin, chair of the Music Department at the University of Virginia, composed *Adonai Roi*

during the week following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, on November 4, 1995. The comforting words of Psalm 23 receive a simple, homophonic setting, but the harmonies ache with loss even as the music moves calmly ahead.

Robert Beaser's interest in the sound of bells goes back at least to his *Landscape with Bells* for piano, composed in the mid-1980s. There are no bells in the text of *Psalm 150*, but plenty of them tolling and jingling in the piano accompaniment of Beaser's setting, and in the artful way he uses soloists to strike sparks off each other. The piece begins unusually quietly for a setting of this exultant psalm, but picks up speed and excitement as a syncopated, perpetual-motion piano drives the chorus on, climaxing in a breathless setting of the line "Let all that have breath . . ." The closing "Hallelujah," however, is set to the piece's most tender and thoughtful music. Commissioned in 1995 by Cantor Bruce Ruben and Temple Shaaray Tefilla in New York City, in honor of the synagogue's 150th anniversary, it was first performed by The New York Concert Singers, Judith Clurman conducting.

The *Magnificat* (so called from its first word in the Latin text) is the devotional poem uttered by the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:46-55, when she was carrying Jesus in her womb. To mention this text is to remember the great choral setting of it by J. S. Bach, in many sections and abundant counterpoint. By contrast, the setting by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich for chorus and organ presents the text as the humble meditation of a young woman: It is "simple" in its brevity, its straightforward declamation of the text (often in bare octaves), and clear C major tonality. Harmonic colors in the choir are applied sparingly, but to telling effect. Commissioned by the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and written in 1994 as a memorial to the composer's uncle, Frederick Hope, *A Simple Magnificat* was first performed on December 6, 1994, by the Yale Divinity School Choir, the Yale Glee Club, the Yale Camerata (Marguerite Brooks, conductor), and organist Victoria Sirota.

John Schlenck, music director of the Vedanta Society of New York since 1961, gives markedly different settings to each of the sacred Hindu texts in his *Three Vedantic Hymns*. The first is a dialogue between organ and chorus in a homophonic style, that is, with all the syllables pronounced together for maximum clarity of the text; the hymn's orderly rhetoric invites a rhythmically square setting, which is nevertheless colorful harmonically, and it rises from a "stillness" in the first line to an almost ecstatic *fortissimo* at the end. The distinctive sound of tambura, the Indian drone instrument, mingles with the harp to weave a sensuous, nocturnal atmosphere around the second hymn, virtually a love song for "the individual self and the immortal Self." The third hymn is only one stanza, repeated six times like a mantra, but with subtle variations in the harmony each time, as if to view the object of devotion from many angles.

—David Wright

David Wright *contributes articles to The New York Times and program notes to Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center. He is a recipient of the ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award for excellence in writing about music.*

Simon Sargon

Eil Nora Alilab

(English translation of text)

God of awesome deeds, grant us pardon,

As the gates begin to close.

We who are few in number look up to You,
With trembling, we praise You,
As the gates begin to close.
Proclaim a year of favor,
Return the remnant of Your flock to honor and glory,
As the gates begin to close.

Robert Beaser

Psalm 119

(Adaptation of Psalm 119 text by Robert Beaser)

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Blessed are they that keep his testimonies,
Who walk in the way of the Lord.

Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes
And I shall keep it unto the end.
And I will praise thee with uprightness of heart.
Incline my heart unto thy statutes,
Praise the Lord.
Make me to go in the path of the Lord
For thy word is my salvation;
Thy law is my delight.
My soul melteth away for sorrow, O Lord.
How I long for thy word.
For thy word is my song within the house of my pilgrimage.
Teach me thy way of thy hand.
Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes
And I shall keep it unto the end,
For I am a stranger,
Teach me, O Lord, thy way.
Stablish thy word unto thy servants;
Quicken thou me in thy way.

Make thy face to shine, shine upon thy servant.
Give me understanding and I will keep thy commandments.
Blessed are those who keep thy statutes.
Blessed are those who keep thy word.
Let my supplications come before thee,
For in thy law do I delight.
Open thou mine eyes that I may behold the wonders of thy hand.
I will keep thy word, Lord, forever,
I will sing thy praise, Lord, forever.
Let my soul live and it shall praise thee.
Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes
For in thy law do I delight.

I will praise thee.

My soul languishes for thy salvation.
Yet I do not forget thy word.
O let my cry come near before thee.
Consider how I love thy word,
Consider how I love thy precepts,
Grant peace to those who love thy law;
Deliver me from man's oppression,
O Lord, how I hope for thy salvation.
For thy word is true from the beginning
And every one endures forever.
So I shall keep thy law forevermore.
Let my soul live and it shall praise thee, O Lord.
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord
With uprightness of heart
O hear my cry and sing Praise to the Lord,
With uprightness of heart.
Alleluia.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich

Thanksgiving Song

We give thanks for our blessings on this day of Thanksgiving. On this day we remember those less fortunate and remember those departed from us. We give thanks.

Aaron Jay Kernis

Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord

Psalm 86: 11, 12
Teach me Thy way, O Lord;
I will walk in thy truth;
Unite my heart to fear thy name.
I will praise Thee,
O Lord, my God, with all my heart
And I will glorify thy name forever.

Stephen Paulus

Meditations of Li Po

(English text based on poetry of Li Po [701-762])

I . . . and even my soul remains quiet

You ask why I make my home in the mountain forest
and I smile, and am silent,
and even my soul remains quiet:

it lives in the other world
which no one owns.
The peach blossom.
The water flows.

II I lift my eyes to watch the mountain moon

Moonlight in front of my bed--
I took it for frost on the ground!
I lift my eyes to watch the mountain moon,
lower them and dream of home.

III . . . and now the last cloud drains away

The birds have vanished into the sky,
and now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

Judith Shatin

Adonai Roi

(English translation of text)

A Psalm of David

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- 3 He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me.
- 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Robert Beaser

Psalm 150

Hallelujah.
Praise God in the Sanctuary;
Praise God in the Sky,
The powerful firmament.
Praise God's great and mighty acts;
Praise God for abundant greatness.
Praise God with the sound of shofar,

Praise God with harp and lyre.
Praise God with timbrel and dance;
Praise God with lute and pipe.
Praise God with resounding cymbals;
Praise God with loud crashing cymbals.
Let all that have breath praise our God.
Hallelujah.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich

A Simple Magnificat

Magnificat anima mea
My soul magnifies the Lord.
And my spirit rejoices in God the Savior.
For he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For he who is mighty has done things for me; and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud,
in the imagination of their hearts.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted,
exalted those of low degree.
He has filled the hungry.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.
As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his prosperity forever.

John Schlenck

Three Vedantic Hymns

I If God Is Seen in All Things

(Bhagavad-Gita, [IV: 18-25], English rendering by Erik Johns)

In stillness lies great action,
In action lies great rest;
They who find this place are wise,
They act in poise and are at peace.

Sages call a person wise
Who starts an act not wishing praise,
Who ends an act not fearing blame
Chains melt in wisdom's flame.

Freed from bonds of hope and fear,
Freed from envy, lust and greed,
Let us act and act alone,
Knowing that nothing is our own.

After pain comes pleasure, after pleasure, pain;
Gain follows loss and loss follows gain
What God gives and takes away
Are all accepted as God's play.

Freed from bonds of hope and fear,
Freed from envy, lust and greed,
Let us act and act alone,
Knowing that nothing is our own.

When the final bonds are broken,
The illumined heart will beat in God,
And ev'ry beat proclaim the glory of God's name.

The ritual is God, the offering is God,
God is the devotee who is offering to the holy fire that is God.
If God is seen in all things, one finds God.

II Like Two Birds of Golden Plumage

(Mundaka Upanishad [III: 1.1-2], translation by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester)

Like two birds of golden plumage, inseparable companions,
the individual self and the immortal Self are perched on the branches of the self-same tree.

The former tastes of the sweet and bitter fruits of the tree;
The latter, tasting of neither, calmly observes.

The individual self, deluded by the forgetfulness of his identity with the divine self, bewildered by his ego, grieves and is sad. But when he recognizes the worshipful Lord as his own true Self and beholds his glory, he grieves no more.

III You Shall Find Me

(Bhagavad-Gita [XVIII: 65], translation by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood)

Give me your whole heart,
Love and adore me,
Worship me always,
Bow to me only,
And you shall find me.

Permission of publication of texts by: I Vedanta West Communications, NY
II & III: Vedanta Press, Hollywood, CA.

Judith Clurman is founder and music director of the New York Concert Singers, and conductor of

the New York Chamber Symphony Chorus. Recognized as a musical innovator and champion of American composers, Ms. Clurman has conducted premieres of works by Leonard Bernstein, John Corigliano, David Diamond, Philip Glass, Ned Rorem, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. She is a frequent guest conductor of choral ensembles for Lincoln Center's Great Performers and *Live from Lincoln Center* on PBS. Prominent musicians, including James Levine, Frederica von Stade, Seiji Ozawa, Trevor Pinnock, Christa Ludwig, and The Canadian Brass, as well as Jim Henson's Muppets, have collaborated with her. Ms. Clurman has appeared with the Orchestra of St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Mostly Mozart, the Zimriya/International Choral Festival, and The Brooklyn Academy of Music's New Wave Festival. In addition, she serves as music director for the holiday tree lighting at Lincoln Center. Ms. Clurman has been featured on programs on National Public Radio, the Voice of America, WNYC, and WQXR, and has recorded for Delos and New World Records. Educated at Oberlin College and The Juilliard School, she is currently on the Juilliard faculty.

The New York Concert Singers, founded in 1988 by Judith Clurman, functions in a variety of musical roles, from chamber ensemble to full chorus. They have performed in Lincoln Center's Great Performers series, at the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival, on *Live From Lincoln Center*, at Merkin Concert Hall, and at Carnegie Hall. Their repertory includes music ranging from Renaissance to modern, including many world premieres of works by contemporary Americans. Featured on programs on National Public Radio, the Voice of America, WNYC, and WQXR, the ensemble has recorded for Delos and New World Records. The New York Concert Singers received the first Chorus America/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming in Contemporary Music.

Keith S. Toth, organist

Keith S. Toth, Mollie Nichols, handbells

Susan Jolles, harp

John M. Schlenck, tambura

David Korevaar, piano

Sopranos

Marion Beckenstein

Gail Blache-Gill

Krystiane Cheetham

Margery Daley

Cassandra Hoffman

Beverly Myers

Marcia Young

Mezzo Sopranos

Ann Ory Brown

Julia Fischer

Megan Friar

Mary Marathe

Martha Dunn Mechalakos

Nancy Wertsch*

Tenors

Rodne Brown
Martin Doner
Jim Fredericks
Mukund Marathe
Mark Victor Smith
James Archie Worley

Basses

Frank Barr
Paul Houghtaling
Aaron James
Curtis Streetman
Jon E. Szabo
Mark Wagstrom

* personnel director

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Robert Beaser:

Chorale Variations. American Composers Orchestra, Dennis Russell-Davies, conductor. Argo 440337-2.
Song of the Bells. Paula Robison, flute; Solisti New York Chamber Orchestra, Alasdair Neale, conductor. New World 80403-2.

Aaron Jay Kernis:

Colored Field. Julie Ann Giacobassi, English horn; San Francisco Symphony, Alasdair Neale, conductor. Argo 448174-2.
Mozart en Route. Aaron Berofsky, violin; David Harding, viola; Tom Rosenberg, cello. New Albion NA 083CD.
Symphony in Waves. New York Chamber Symphony, Gerard Schwarz, conductor. Argo 436287-2.

Stephen Paulus:

Air on Seurat. Dorothy Lewis, cello; Cary Lewis, piano. Gasparo GSCD 301.
Concertante. Atlanta Symphont, Yoel Levi, conductor. New World 80363-2.
Echoes Between the Silent Peaks. Oregon Repertory Singers, Gilbert Seeley, conductor. Koch International Classics KIC 7279.

Simon Sargon:

Deep Ellum Nights: Three Sketches. J. Cohler, clarinet. Ongaku 024-101.

John Schlenck:

The Illumined Self. Vedantic Arts Ensemble, John Schlenck, conductor. Vedantic Arts VAR 001.

Judith Shatin:

Ignoto Nomine. The Monticello Trio. CRI CD 583.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich:

Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra. Nancy Goeres, bassoon; Pittsburgh Symphony, Lorin Maazel, conductor. New World 80503-2.

Quartet for Strings. New York Quartet. CRI CD 621.

Symbolon. New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta, conductor. New World 80372-2.

Symphony 3. Louisville Orchestra, James Sedares, conductor. Koch International Classics KIC 7278.

Producer: Elizabeth Ostrow

Engineer: Tom Lazarus, Classic Sound Inc., NYC

Recorded at Church of The Heavenly Rest, New York City, October 18-20, 1996

Cover art: Reuben Nakian, *Venus* (1984). Terra cotta, 16 1/2 x 8 5/8 x 6 3/8 inches. Courtesy of Kouros Galleries Ltd., 23 East 73rd Street, New York, NY

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

This recording was made possible with funding provided by the J. G. Trust.

This recording was also made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency.

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**DIVINE GRANDEUR
THE NEW YORK CONCERT SINGERS
JUDITH CLURMAN, Conductor**

Simon Sargon (b. 1938)

- 1 *Eil Nora Alilab* (publ. by Transcontinental Music) (3:09)
Keith S. Toth, organ

Robert Beaser (b. 1954)

- 2 *Psalm 119* (publ. by Helicon Music Corp.) (13:32)
soloists: Beverly Myers, soprano; Nancy Wertsch, mezzo soprano; Mukund Marathe, tenor;
Paul Houghtaling, baritone

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich (b. 1939)

- 3 *Thanksgiving Song* (publ. by Merion Music, Inc.) (3:03)
David Korevaar, piano

Aaron Jay Kernis (b. 1960)

- 4 *Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord* (publ. by Associated Music) (4:51)
Keith S. Toth, organ

Stephen Paulus (b. 1949)

- Meditations of Li Po* (publ. by European American Music)
5 . . . and even my soul remains quiet (4:57)
Beverly Myers, soprano
6 . . . I lift my eyes to watch the mountain moon (4:54)
7 . . . and now the last cloud drains away (4:59)
Keith S. Toth, Mollie Nichols, handbells

Judith Shatin (b. 1949)

- 8 *Adonai Roi* (publ. by Lawson-Gould Music Publishers Inc.) (2:39)

Robert Beaser

- 9 *Psalm 150* (publ. by Helicon Music Corp.) (7:37)
David Korevaar, piano; soloists: Cassandra Hoffman, Marion Beckenstein, sopranos; Ann Ory Brown, mezzo soprano; James Archie Worley, tenor; Paul Houghtaling, baritone; Curtis Streetman, bass

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich

- 10 *A Simple Magnificat* (publ. by Merion Music, Inc.) (5:25)
Keith S. Toth, organ

John Schlenck (b. 1936)

- Three Vedantic Hymns* (publ. by Vedanta West Communications)
11 If God Is Seen in All Things (4:06)
Keith S. Toth, organ
12 Like Two Birds of Golden Plumage (5:55)
Susan Jolles, harp; John Schlenck, tambura
13 You Shall Find Me (2:53)

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