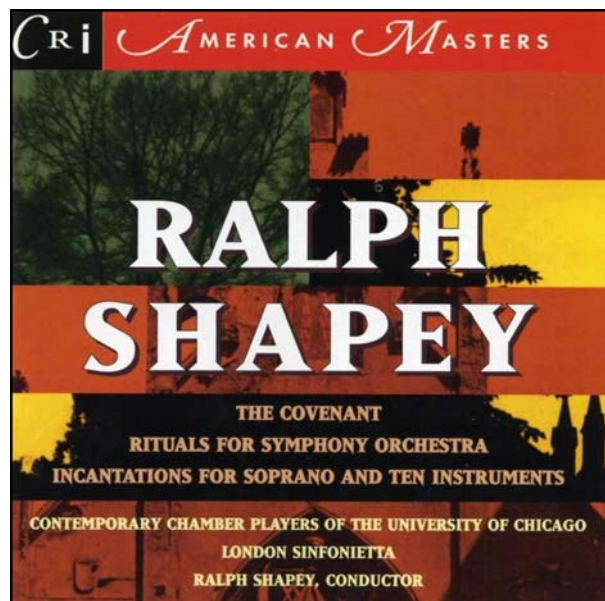


NWCR690

# Ralph Shapey

## The Covenant/Rituals/Incantations



*The Covenant* for Soprano, Sixteen players and Two Pre-Recorded Tapes (1977)..... (42:13)

1. It Was ..... (20:12)
2. God of Mercy ..... (11:25)
3. I Believe ..... (3:21)
4. It Shall ..... (7:21)

Elsa Charleston, soprano; Contemporary Players of the University of Chicago: Marie Moulton, flute/piccolo; Robert Morgan, oboe/English horn; Lawrie Bloom, clarinet; Norbert Nielubowski, bassoon; Thomas Howell, French horn; Brian Perry, trumpet;

Edward Koche, trombone; Peter Wahrhaftig, tuba; Andrea Swan, piano; Edward Poremba, percussion; Michael C. Green, timpani; Elliott M. Golob, violin I; Everett Zlatoff-Mirsky, viola; David Hildner, violin; Barbara Haffner, cello; Joseph Guastafeste, bass; Voice tapes recorded by Elsa Charlston, soprano, and Gershon Sillins, baritone.

*Rituals* for Symphony Orchestra (1959) ..... (12:25)

5. I ..... (9:12)

6. II ..... (3:20)

London Sinfonietta

With improvising musicians in the second movement: Ray Swingfield, alto sax; Richard Fudoli, tenor sax; Roy Willoc, baritone sax; William Thomas McKinley, piano.

*Incantations* for Soprano and Ten Instruments (1961) (17:57)

7. I ..... (8:35)

8. II ..... (2:21)

9. III ..... (2:31)

10. IV ..... (4:28)

Bethany Beardslee, soprano; Contemporary Chamber Players of the University of Chicago: Roger Malitz, cello; John Cobb, piano; Paul Ondracek, French horn; Fred Hemke, saxophone; Charles Geyer, solo trumpet; Lenny Morrison, trumpet; Edward Poremba, timpani; Norbert Szymanski, percussion. Ralph Shapey, conductor.

Total playing time: 72:46

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## Notes

I believe that a great work of Art is a work that transcends the immediate moment into a world of Infinity, complete and finite within itself, of inevitability, and of Oneness—and that a series of such moments must result in a dynamic, unforgettable experience.

Music as an object in Time and Space

Aggregate sounds structured into concrete sculptured forms.

Images existing as a totality from their inception, each a self-involved unit of individual proportions.

Related, inter-related, and unrelated images organized into an organic whole.

Permutations occurring only within

each self-contained

unit.

Varied phases resulting from juxtaposition of designs.

Imposed discipline by ritualistic reiteration.

*The Covenant*, for soprano, sixteen players, and two prerecorded tapes, was written at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, between July 15 and August 23, 1977. The themes of Israel's international composition competition—"Holocaust and Rebirth"—inspired the work, although the piece was not written specifically for this context. *The Covenant* celebrates the thirtieth anniversary of Israel, and is dedicated to the miracle of the rebirth of Israel, but it is meant for all humankind: to walk upright, in dignity, in the image of —, as One.

The text is taken from various sources: Nelly Sachs, Walt Whitman, Pierre Louÿs, Kadia Molodowsky, Hayyim Bialik, Vera Klement, the Old Testament, and inscriptions written on

cellar walls by Jews hiding from the Nazis. The piece is in four parts, played without pause.

Peter T. Daniels wrote the following about *The Covenant* in the *Chicago Maroon*: “Its four sections encapsulate the most significant moments of Jewish history: Covenant, Holocaust, Reaffirmation, and Apocalypse. The second part is a more terrifying vision than even Schoenberg’s *Survivor from Warsaw*. In Shapey’s version, the poet’s ‘landscape of screams’ is the key. The soprano is set against her taped self, now screaming, now singing high above the staff, now sinking below it. Synthesizer chords add to the fury, while rising and falling. Over all a disembodied voice recites Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. The work goes on to chordal epiphanies, and ends with a moving setting of the famous words carved opposite the United Nations, and a final psalm of praise.”

John Von Rhein wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*: “The musical impulses and humanistic convictions that gave rise to Ralph Shapey’s oratorio *Praise* (1971) are both extended and intensified in his new work, *The Covenant*. *The Covenant* addresses itself essentially to the contemporary crises of faith. It does so in a musical language that is often strident, prickly, dense, and convoluted to the ear—but which is absolutely right for what Shapey wishes to say. And what he says has an intensity, seriousness, and underlying vein of humanity that shine through the often thornily dissonant texture. *The Covenant* uses a complexity of emotion that is essential to all spiritually based music. All this adds up to a statement of surprising coherence and undeniable power—‘romantic,’ even lyrical, for all its violence.”

*Rituals* for Symphony Orchestra is the third work of a Trilogy for Orchestra, which also includes *Ontogeny* for Symphony Orchestra and *Invocation*: Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. *Rituals* was also composed at the MacDowell Colony in the summer of 1959.

Philosophically, *Rituals* deals with an aspect of mankind that I find exhilarating. In order for man to attempt to understand the unfathomable he has incorporated his fears, hates, and loves into religious practices. These practices have always taken the form of ritual. The piece deals with man’s desire to create, to hold, to understand, to capture that unknown through the force, power, and inflexibility of ritual, thus achieving states of ecstasy beyond imagination. In life, ritual is a repeated set of acts approached in terms of the human deification of the unknown known through the act of Ritual.

That which I hear within me is not the “thing” music, but the totality of a moment; I seek to give coherence to that moment and to eternalize the second.

A series of concrete acts in repetition are bound into a tight formal structure, each separate and unique, dependent and interdependent upon each other, resulting in a ritualistic formulation of sound.

The score of *Rituals* is prefaced with the following quotation from Ver Klement: “With silver mallet against bone I chisel at the calcified truth of gained maturity.”

The score also contains a detailed seating plan for the orchestra, which is divided into eight self-contained, mixed groups of instruments—“chamber orchestras” or “Graven Images.”

The musical style of *Rituals* stems from a post-Webern practice decidedly tempered by a tendency toward Romantic expression. The music is serial. The two movements are based on the same material—motives which are heard at the opening of the first movement. The principle of repetition with variation dominates the construction. Changes in color,

texture, and motive-shape are continuous; each musical event is unique, and is not to be heard twice in the same way. This does not mean that a motive will not be repeated; however, when a motive is repeated, the setting will have changed so that the effect will be new and fresh.

The second movement is built on an ostinato in the percussion. The entire movement is a grand crescendo, beginning softly and culminating with a triple forte. Blocks of sound are introduced against the rhythmic drive of the ostinato. An aleatoric (chance) element is introduced: the piano and the saxophones are to improvise around given material in a completely free style. The improvisation of the saxophones is not meant to be jazz—it is the strain of the individual voice against the hypnotic insistence of the ritualistic force.

*Incantations* was written in 1961 in New York City and is dedicated to Bethany Beardslee, who gave the first performance with the New York Composer’ Forum on April 23, 1961. The piece is in four movements. The soprano sings “syllables” instead of words in order to create the feeling of the magical and supernatural. In the first movement, there is a duet between soprano and cello (as though the cello is the bass voice). The second movement is an aria that uses material from the first movement. The third movement is without soprano but includes a trumpet solo. Critic Allen Hughes, writing in the *New York Times*, described this movement as “the shattering blare of street and machine, the frenzied rush that won’t slow down.” And of the fourth movement he wrote: “A lone human voice cries out—wrestling, questioning, imploring, a poignant little song that is almost a lullaby.” For Hughes, “these *Incantations*, so overwhelming in their impact, rise above all question of style and technique ... [to create] a composition of Abstract Expressionism that seems to lay bare the most secret and elemental doubts, yearnings, torments and despairs of the human soul.”

—Ralph Shapey (b Philadelphia, 12 March 1921; d Chicago, 13 June 2002)

(Compiled from notes to the original LPs and from reviews of the compositions.)

### *The Covenant*

#### I. It Was

It was  
at the beginning  
It was  
My beloved  
It was

(Lines excerpted from *O the Chimneys* by Nelly Sachs, translated by Michael Roloff and Michael Hamburger. Copyright ©1967 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.)

I am the lord thy God, and there is none else.  
Beside me there is no God;  
there is none beside me;  
I form the light, and create darkness;  
make I peace, and create I evil;  
I am the Lord thy God that doeth all things.  
(Old Testament: Exodus.)

Therefore, if ye will hearken unto my voice  
and keep my covenant, then ye shall be  
mine own treasure among all peoples:

for all the earth is mine, ye shall be unto me a kingdom of  
priests, a holy nation.  
(Old Testament: Exodus.)

I am, even I, am the Lord:  
beside me there is no Savior.  
I have declared, and I have saved, and  
I have announced, therefore ye are  
my witnesses, I am the Lord, and I,  
and I am God, I am.  
(Old Testament: Exodus.)

I am the first, and I, I am the last  
and beside me there is no God.  
(Old Testament: Isaiah.)

I the lord shall reign forever and ever.  
(Old Testament: Exodus.)

I am, I am the Lord  
(Old Testament: Isaiah.)

I sing the body electric  
(Line excerpted from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman;  
in public domain.)

I sing of my flesh and my life  
(Line excerpted from *Songs of Bilitis* by Pierre Louÿs.  
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Corporation.

## II. *God of Mercy*

This is the landscape of screams!—  
Ashen scream from visionary eye tortured blind—  
O you bleeding eye  
in the tattered eclipse of the sun  
hung up to be dried by God  
in the cosmos—  
O the night of the weeping children  
O the night of the children branded for death!

(Lines excerpted from *O the Chimneys* by Nelly Sachs,  
translated by Michael Roloff and Michael Hamburger.  
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Inc.)

O God of Mercy  
for the time being  
choose another people.  
We are tired of death, tired of corpses,  
We have no more prayers.  
For the time being  
choose another people.

(From *God of Mercy* by Kadia Molodowsky. Translated  
by Irving Howe. From *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*,  
edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. Copyright  
©1969 by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg. Reprinted  
by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Publishers.)

## III. *I Believe*

Out of the Dead Letters welled forth songs of Life.  
(Line excerpted from *And If the Angel Should Ask* by  
Hayyim Bialik. From *Modern Hebrew Poetry A Bilingual  
Anthology*. Ruth Finer Mintz, translator and editor.  
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California; reprinted by permission of the University of  
California Press.

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining,  
I believe in love even when feeling it not,  
I believe in God even when He is silent.

(Inscription on the walls of a cellar in Cologne, written by  
Jews hiding from the Nazis.)

O give me a stone colossus  
dull hollow stone  
honed by rain long forgotten  
and from that hollow eye proclaim  
the name  
I name  
I cannot speak alone

Walking upright  
I shed the promise of hereafter  
becoming naked  
before man  
as a sea washed stone  
bleaching on the endless sands.

(Line excerpted from *Walking Upright* by Vera Klement.  
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And it shall come to pass in the end of days,  
that the mountain of the lord's house shall  
be established at the top of the mountains,  
And shall be exalted above the hills;  
And all the nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples  
shall go and say:  
"Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
To the house of the God of Jacob;  
and He will teach us of His ways,  
And we will walk in His paths,"  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
And the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
and he shall judge between the nations,  
And shall decide for many peoples:  
And they shall beat their swords  
into plowshares,  
And their spears into pruning-hooks.  
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
Neither shall they learn war any more.  
(Old Testament: Isaiah)

O sing unto the lord, a new song  
O sing unto the Lord, all the earth  
O sing unto the Lord, Bless His name  
Proclaim His salvation from day to day  
Declare His glory among the nations  
His marvelous works among all peoples  
O sing unto the Lord.  
(Old Testament: Psalms)

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## Production Notes

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