

NWCR887

# Ruth Lomon

## *Songs of Remembrance*



### *Songs of Remembrance* (1996)

1. Chor der Waisen ..... (4:14)
2. Mes Yeux ..... (4:11)
3. The Survivor ..... (5:02)
4. Fear ..... (4:42)
5. Der Ewige Segne ..... (4:06)
6. The Butterfly ..... (4:29)
7. Gedale's Song ..... (6:13)
8. Sunny Evening ..... (5:20)
9. Poème Macabre ..... (8:43)
10. Love Poem ..... (13:21)

Jayne West, soprano; Pamela Dellal, mezzo-soprano; Frank Kelley, tenor; Donald Boothman, baritone; Laura Ahlbeck oboe, English horn; Donald Berman, piano

Total playing time: 61:31

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## Notes

### *Songs of Remembrance*

A conversation with Ruth Lomon

by Johanna Keller

In 1945, as the Allies swept across Europe and the Third Reich crumbled, the Nazi death camps were liberated one by one. Photographs and news accounts forced the world at last to confront and acknowledge the horror of the genocide that had taken place. At the time, it was widely thought that words would never be found to express such inhumanity, and that the experience of such profound suffering lay beyond human expression. In reality, seminal works about the Holocaust appeared almost immediately; Viktor Frankl's important psychological treatise, *Man's Search for Meaning*, was published in 1946, and *If This Is a Man*, the first volume of Primo Levi's autobiographical memoir appeared in 1947, and many more books followed. This resiliency and urgent impulse of artistic response to that monumental twentieth-century tragedy proves the human desire to create a narrative, context, and meaning from reality, however gruesomely incomprehensible it may be.

Almost six decades later, new works of history, philosophy, and art of all genres are still confronting the Holocaust in the context of a new millennium world that acknowledges genocide as part of our reality. I spoke with composer Ruth Lomon in order to understand her impulse to create this song cycle.

**JK:** You've described the inception of *Songs of Remembrance* as being inspired by a year's stay in Jerusalem in 1994 during which you immersed yourself in reading poetry in the Library of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. What has been your history with Israel and did you know in advance what your composition would entail?

**RL:** I lived in Israel in 1955-56, 1987, and 1993-94. My husband, Earle, is a physicist and we go back to Israel for his

work and because we love the country and the friends we have there. At the time of our departure for Israel in 1994, the Oslo agreement had been reached and we were filled with renewed hope for peace. Originally, I intended to compose a song cycle on poems of peace by Israeli and Palestinian poets. But with the return of mounting conflict and tensions, this hope eroded and I turned my thoughts to the subject of the Holocaust.

**JK:** You also studied Persian and Arabic modes (*Maqamat*) with its use of quarter-tones, as well as the *Segah*, used in the singing of the Torah. In addition, you have investigated early Christian music, precursors of Gregorian chant and Armenian church music from the third century. Were there features of these exotic and archaic music languages that you found particularly inspiring? How did you incorporate them into your own musical language?

**RL:** The embellishments or melismas of the melodic line in the settings of "Mes Yeux," "Gedale's Song," "Fear," and "Sunny Evening" are influenced by the modes. Examples of the influence of early Armenian chants are most noticeable in the cadential material I use in "Mes Yeux," which was the first poem I set to music; it also is a microcosmos of the song cycle because it contains harmonic and melodic references that are the basis of the work.

**JK:** The cycle opens with an extraordinary setting of the poem by Nellie Sachs in which the phrase "Wir Waise" (We orphans) becomes a statement of the paradox of the shared solitude of suffering, a central theme in Holocaust literature and in this moving collection of songs. There is the feeling of retelling or reframing what has been said in order to preserve it for the future and counteract this isolation. You met with two of the poets, Berthe Wizenberg Fleischer and Miriam Merzbacher-Blumenthal, who live in New York and Connecticut respectively. How did they react to your project?

RL: I was worried about taking these very personal poems and setting them to music, but when I met with Berthe and Miriam and corresponded with the other poets, they made it clear that they felt it important to have the worlds sung, spoken, whatever the vehicle, so that we keep this knowledge of the Holocaust alive. Meeting Professor Rosette C. Lamont was also very important. She is the translator of Charlotte Delbo's autobiography *Auschwitz and After*. A resistance fighter during WWII, and a non-Jew, Delbo witnessed the execution of her husband, Georges Dudach, a leader in the resistance movement, for his refusal to cooperate with the German Army, and she was then deported to Auschwitz. "Love Poem" is an account of his death. In the words of Primo Levi, what is written by poets and writers of the Holocaust creates a testament, "a new bible, a form of sacred literature."

JK: Certainly Levi's poetry constitutes one of the central testaments of the Holocaust. The two poems of Levi's that you included in this cycle are haunted and haunting, poems in which history—personal and tribal—is repetitious, inescapable, and possibly tragically cyclical. In the first poem, "The Survivor," the speaker begins with the quote from the Coleridge poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": "Since then, at an uncertain hour, / That agony returns:/ And till my ghastly tale is told / this heart within me burns."

RL: "Survivor" illustrates the constant replay in his memory of the faces of his sleeping camp inmates and the deep guilt experienced by a survivor. "Stand back, leave me alone, submerged people...I haven't dispossessed anyone / Haven't usurped anyone's bread / No one died in my place"—but the guilt of survival remains.

JK: "Gedale's Song," also by Levi, is similarly haunted, but here the apparitions are political and historical, in which the Jewish people are "ghetto sheep" and "the cantors / Withered in the shadow of the Cross." He goes on to connect the Holocaust to the ancient tales of Masada and of David and Goliath. Despite the Jewish specificity of this poem, Levi's refrain, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? / If not like this, how? And if not now, when?" seems a tragically universal utterance.

RL: This poem is important not only for the clearly articulated historical perspective but in his cry "Brothers, away from the Europe of graves" and in his call to climb together to Israel where "we shall be men among other men," there is a flow of energy and renewed hope, of rising up once more, as in historical times, which caught me up and I hope I have captured that in the setting of this powerful statement.

JK: The response to the Holocaust—its literature—is multi-dimensional and international, as you eloquently demonstrate by setting texts from different languages—German, French, and Italian. And then you add another layer of response with the inclusion of the three poems written by children ("Fear," "The Butterfly" and "On a Sunny Evening"). What were the stories behind these poems?

RL: The three poems were written by youngsters in the Theresienstadt camp, a supposed model camp created to allay the suspicions of the Allies about conditions in the camps. "Fear" is a heart-rending account of the dreaded typhus spreading through the ghetto. "Today the ghetto knows a different fear..." and the fervent cry "No, no, my God, we want to live!" In "The Butterfly," the dazzling yellow of a single butterfly that alights in the ghetto provides a moment of reflection for the poet; the last butterfly mirrors the fate of the ghetto victims. "Sunny Evening" reflects on the beauty of sun shining on gnarled chestnut trees in bloom and the child's

fervent desire to live "If in barbed wire things can bloom / Why couldn't I? I will not die!"

And, in some sense, that child has stated metaphorically the bitter triumph of Holocaust literature itself—that despite the barbed wire and the unspeakable horrors, those written works of testament and witness did survive.

JK: On another subject, I'm curious about this composition's relationship to your works, in which a major influence has been your studies of Navajo mythology, religion, and music. You have also lived in New Mexico for a part of every year for the past quarter century. One has a sense of preserving and giving voice to a fragile but vibrant culture—another kind of testimony. Since you don't have ethnic connections to either Native American culture nor the Holocaust, did you have a sense of approaching these often sensitive subjects as an "outsider?"

RL: I never felt an "outsider" while composing the music. My empathy with the emotional and spiritual force of the poems made me feel at one with the poet. Perhaps the perspective of the "outsider" better recognizes the universality of the message of the Holocaust—and this perspective may strengthen the message of Levi's "new testament." This cry for awareness must penetrate far beyond the victims. As I was composing *Songs of Remembrance*, the daily news reports of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Rwanda drove home the obvious—that we must never forget the twentieth century's legacy of genocide.

Johanna Keller lives in New York City, writes about words and music, and received the ASCAP- Deems Taylor Award for essays in the *New York Times*. She co-edited *Carolyn Kizer: Perspectives on Her Life & Work* (CavanKerry Press, 2001).

**Ruth Lomon's** compositions include orchestral, chamber, vocal, and solo works as well as multi-media works. She has been awarded commissions and grants from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts, New England Foundation for the Arts, The New Mexico Arts Division, National Endowment for the Arts, the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, residencies at Yaddo, and Norlin/MacDowell fellowships. Since 1998 Lomon has been composer and resident scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University.

Lomon's recent works include *Odyssey*, a trumpet concerto commissioned by the Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra of Boston for Charles Schlueter, principal trumpet of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which was premiered in 1998, and *Requiem* for full chorus and soprano solo accompanied by brass and woodwinds, premiered in Boston in 1997 by Coro Allegro. She is presently composing an oratorio, *Witnesses* for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra, through a grant from the Hadassah International Research Center.

*Songs of Remembrance* was composed while Lomon was a fellow of the Bunting Institute, Radcliffe/Harvard in 1995-6. *Songs* was premiered at the John Knowles Paine Concert Hall, Harvard University, and has since had numerous performances including those at the USA National Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C., in 1998, and the IAWM Congress in London, England, in 1999, where Lomon received the Miriam Gideon Composition award for the work.

Her music is published by Arsis Press, Washington, D.C. and Zimbel Press, NY. Her orchestral works are recorded by the Warsaw National Philharmonic Orchestra (*Terra Incognita*), Jerzy Swoboda, conductor, and the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra (Bassoon Concerto) Gerard Schwarz, conductor, for MMC Recordings.

Born in 1930 in Montreal, Canada, Lomon attended the Conservatoire de Québec and McGill University. She continued her composition studies with Frances Judd Cooke at

the New England Conservatory of Music and, later, with Witold Lutoslawski at Dartington College, England. Lomon spends much of her composing time in New Mexico, where her interest in Native American ceremonials has been a catalyst for some of her major compositions.

**Laura Ahlbeck** is principal oboe of the Boston Pops Esplanade and is frequently heard in a variety of groups including the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Boston Pops, Emmanuel Church, the Boston Lyric Opera, and the Walden Chamber Players. Ahlbeck has been a member of the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, the Orchestra Sinfonica de Maracaibo, the Eastern Conservatory of Music, and Boston Conservatory.

Pianist **Donald Berman**'s solo recording *The Unknown Ives* (CRI 811) was named one of the best of the year (1999) by *Fanfare* and the *Boston Globe*. Berman is a member of Dinosaur Annex Music Ensemble, has been a League/ISCM soloist, and was a visiting artist fellow at the American Academy in Rome in 1998. He has been featured soloist at Merkin Hall, Weill Hall, and Miller Theater in New York City, as well as in the "Masters of Tomorrow" series in Germany, La Foce in Tuscany, Monadnock Music, NPR's "The Connection," and with the Martha Graham and Mark Morris Dance Companies. Berman directs the Firstworks program for First Night Boston and Rome Prize Concerts in New York City.

**Donald Boothman** has been the leading baritone with the Washington Civic Opera and taught on the faculty of the American University. He was cantorial soloist at the Washington Hebrew congregation and has toured Germany with Herman Berlinski in programs commemorating "Kristallnacht" and Berlinski's song cycle *Return*. He has recorded the songs of John Duke, stemming from a long collaboration of premieres and concerts of Duke's compositions. Boothman's performances have taken him throughout Europe, Asia, South America, and the United States. Singing in Russian, Czech, and Hebrew, his "Voice of America" broadcasts have reached audiences in Eastern Europe. Boothman teaches at Clark University.

Mezzo-soprano **Pamela Dellal** has sung under such renowned conductors as Christopher Hogwood, Roger Norrington, and William Christie, making her Lincoln Center debut under the latter with the Handel and Haydn Society at Avery Fisher Hall. She also has performed with the Tokyo Oratorio Society, the

Boston Early Music Festival, Aston Magna, the Dallas Bach Society, and the National Chamber Orchestra. She has been featured by opera companies such as the Opera Company of Boston/Opera New England, Opera aperta, Ocean State Lyric Opera, and Prism Opera. Dellal is a founding member of Favella Lyrica and has made numerous recordings of the music of Hildegard von Bingen as member and acting director of Sequentia's women's ensemble Vox Feminae. She has recorded for Arabesque, Artona, BMG, CRI, Dorian, Meridian, and Koch International.

Tenor **Frank Kelley** has performed many roles with the San Francisco Opera Company and the Boston Lyric Opera, and has appeared at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels, and the Frankfurt Opera. He appeared in the Peter Sellars productions of *Die sieben Todsünden*, *Das kleine Mahagonny*, *Così fan tutte*, and *Le nozze di Figaro*, the last two of which were recorded by Decca and Austrian Public Television and broadcast on PBS's "Great Performances." Kelley has sung in concert with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the National Symphony, the Dallas Symphony, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's; he also has participated in Pepsico Summerfare, the Blossom, Marlboro, Nakamichi, New England Bach, and Next Wave Music festivals. Kelley has recorded for London, Decca, Erato, Harmonia Mundi, Teldec, Telarc, Koch International, Arabesque, and Northeastern.

Soprano **Jayne West** has performed with many of the country's leading orchestras and chamber groups, including the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, National Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Orchestra of St. Luke's, and St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. She has had a long-standing association with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, performing with the orchestra at Symphony Hall and at Tanglewood. West has sung in recital at Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall and in performances at Carnegie Hall and Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center. She performed with in Peter Sellar's production of *Le nozze di Figaro* in Barcelona, Boston, New York, Paris, and Vienna, where it was filmed and broadcast for PBS's "Great Performances." She also has recorded for Hyperion, Decca/Argo, London Records, Music Masters, and Koch International.

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## Production Notes

Producer: Jane Ring Frank, artistic director, Boston Secession

Executive producer: William Wolk, Music First

Recording engineer: William Wolk, Music First

Assistant recording engineer: Matt Azevedo, M Works

Mastering engineer: Jonathan Wyner, M Works

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*Songs of Remembrance* published by the composer (BMI)

Auschwitz survivor, a member of the French Resistance, d. 1985. From *Auschwitz and After*, translated by Prof. Rosette C. Lamont. Available from Yale University Press.