

Musical America

## LIFT EVERY VOICE WITH THE LOS ANGELES CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

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LOS ANGELES AND GLENDALE: The protean conductor/pianist Jeffrey Kahane is in his 20th and final season as music director of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and he wanted to go out with one last idealistic blast of glory. So he came up with the idea of a festival called Lift Every Voice, one that would explore the power of music as a force for protest and reconciliation.

With its collection of concerts and symposiums, Lift Every Voice revolved around the legacies of three figures who spoke out for civil rights in their own ways – Dr. Martin Luther King, Rabbi Joachim Prinz and Kurt Weill. The timing of the festival (Jan. 14 - 29) was deliberate, coinciding with the inauguration of a new American President and Dr. King's birthday (Jan. 15). And it was no coincidence that Kahane happens to be related to Weill (a cousin of his grandmother).

Then the election happened – and the results alarmed a good proportion of the planet. The subsequent inauguration of Donald Trump was followed the next day (Jan. 21) by protests on all seven continents, and the LACO's first Lift Every Voice concert was due to take place that night in Glendale's Alex Theatre.

Suddenly, the concert had become more than just an homage to a composer who fled Nazi Germany to find refuge under the bright lights of Broadway. Kahane, whose own relatives escaped the Holocaust, wouldn't let the moment go by, producing (*a la* activist Khizr Khan) a copy of the Constitution from his pocket as he delivering an impassioned plea for resistance that took a few swipes at the object of the protests without mentioning his name.

Kahane launched his Jan. 21 concert with a primer on the Kurt Weill that most people know, a 19-minute pops-style potpourri of some of his most famous songs from Berlin and Broadway, arranged into a concerto for violinist Daniel Hope by Paul Bateman. In this Song-Suite for Violin and Orchestra – a U.S. premiere – one nifty tune followed another, leaving

room now and then for Hope to play a fancy obbligato for a chorus or two.

Bruce Adolphe's Violin Concerto – subtitled “I Will Not Remain Silent” – casted Hope's violin as a musical portrait of Rabbi Prinz, who warned Jews about their vulnerable position in Nazi Germany and later joined Dr. King's civil rights movement. The violin acted as a voice of passionate resistance against the dissonant orchestral backing representing the Nazis in the first movement and in slightly less-contentious form, the American white supremacists in the second movement. It proved to be an absorbing battle of wills.

Finally, Kahane took on Weill's *The Seven Deadly Sins*, where Bertolt Brecht's sarcastic fable on how to stifle one pleasures, weaknesses and principles in order to get ahead in the world is allied to one of Weill's greatest, most consistently inspired scores. Granted, the English translation used here doesn't fit as well with the music as does the original German, but the overpoweringly sexy, clearly-sung (with amplification) performance of singer Storm Large – who usually performs with the eclectic pop band Pink Martini – conquered all with the sheer force of personality. Not only that, when her character Anna was urged to not get angry about injustice, Large defiantly placed a pink “pussy hat” on her head, and she followed the Weill with a speech about the weekend's events and her own hymn to love, “Stand Up For Me.”

One week later (Jan. 28), the day after the new administration's order to ban Muslims from seven countries took effect, Kahane and the LACO collaborated with the Center for the Art of Performance at UCLA in Lift Every Voice's centerpiece, a full production of Weill's rarely-revived Broadway musical *Lost In The Stars*. The subject was apartheid in South Africa but the subtext was American segregation, since the latter would have had a tougher time being directly addressed in the commercial theater circa 1949. And it didn't take much effort for susceptible concertgoers to draw allusions to the concurrent tribal turmoil rumbling through the daily headlines.

*Lost In The Stars* was Weill's last completed piece for the theatre, and although only 16 years separate it from *The Seven Deadly Sins* (which emerged from his brief interlude in Paris on his way to New York), you can hardly tell that it is the work of the same composer. There is a distinct Weill sound in his American works, but the bite and tough edge of his Berlin period was gone, and the sweetness that was always latent in Weill in Berlin came gushing to the foreground the further into his American period he went. *Lost In the Stars* backs off from the operatic pretensions of

1947's *Street Scene*, but only a bit, for there are numbers that can qualify as arias in the operatic sense as well as some underscoring of dialogue. As in *Porgy and Bess*, none of the lead white characters are singing roles.

There are two outbreaks of Broadway pizzazz – “Who’ll Buy” in Act I and a number for a boy performer, “Big Mole,” that incongruously but effectively relieves the relentlessly downcast tidings of Act II. Yet the most moving portions of the score are the first three numbers, where Weill writes wonderfully emotional, spiritual melodies and harmonies based on African pentatonic scales.

So why hasn’t this work taken a place beside that of *Porgy* in the general American theatre and operatic repertoire? (Indeed, Los Angeles hadn’t seen a professional production since the Broadway road show came to town in 1950.) Part of the problem may be Maxwell Anderson’s book (based on Alan Paton’s novel *Cry, The Beloved Country*), whose stretches of dialogue have their longueurs in spots. There is a lot of agitprop intent that was ahead of its time in 1949, yet may have seemed archaic after the triumphs of the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements. The moral turning point of the plot – in which the white racist James Jarvis suddenly has a change of heart and forgives Stephen Kumalo, the black father of the condemned man who killed Jarvis’s son – is not sufficiently prepared, and thus is not entirely convincing. And protest music of choice moved on to other idioms like soul, folk, rock, township jive, rap, etc. over the decades – far removed from Weill’s Broadway.

That said, Kahane and the LACO gave the most persuasive, beautifully-played case for *Lost In The Stars* I’ve ever heard in the pit of UCLA’s Royce Hall, utilizing a small, somewhat expanded ensemble (Kahane used 21 musicians; Weill wrote for 12). The production also had the enormous advantage of two strong young singers, bass-baritone Justin Hopkins (Stephen) and Heldentenor Issachah Savage (Chorus Leader), who made stirring and eloquent work of their songs. Soprano Meloney Collins (Linda) belted “Who’ll Buy” with appropriate Broadway bravura, and soprano Lauren Michelle brought operatic pathos to Irina’s songs.

Faced with a work in which the costumed chorus is onstage most of the time, director Anne Bogart posed them most effectively when in moody shadow, or when marching in Army-like lockstep to the chug-chugging rhythm of “Train to Johannesburg.” The bare-bones set in UCLA’s Royce Hall consisted mostly of the grubby back wall of the theatre, with occasional changes of locale like a Johannesburg night club in white with colored lighting. The actors for the non-singing parts – Zuri Adele, Will

Bond, Larry Powell, Samuel Stricklen and Stephen Duff Webber – were supplied by Bogart's New York-based SITI Company, and they ably, if sometimes confusingly, played multiple roles. The chorus – a patched-together amalgam of the Albert McNeil Jubilee Singers, the Los Robles Master Chorale, and some independent singers – sang with unified strength and power.

If *Lost In The Stars* ever does catch on, it will probably do so in the opera house, where the dramatic, political and heart-tugging content may be more at home and the classically-trained forces on hand will be better able to perform it. And given today's political atmosphere, where once-seemingly settled battles are being re-fought, the piece's content might find a new resonance. It certainly seemed to resonate among the blue-state audience in Royce Hall.