



THE SOUND OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

THE VIOLINS OF HOPE PROJECT PAYS TRIBUTE TO RESILIENCE AND TRIUMPH OVER ADVERSITY.

by LIBBY SLATE

THE HAUNTING JOHN WILLIAMS THEME FROM the 1993 film *Schindler's List*, the true story of a man who saved 1,200 Jews from Nazi death camps by employing them in his factories, has become the music perhaps most symbolic of the Holocaust for those in the modern era. In the film, it is played by violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman.

In a series of Southern California concerts this spring, it will be performed several times by other musicians—on violins that survived the Holocaust.

The concerts are the most prominent aspect of a multifaceted Holocaust-themed traveling project called *Violins of Hope*, which takes place in numerous venues March 22–April 26 and also presents lectures, educational programs and musical salons; the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust presents a violin exhibition.

The programs center on 50 violins, plus one viola and one cello, that survived the Holocaust and were restored by father-son violin makers Amnon and Avshalom Weinstein in Tel Aviv, Israel. The Weinstains have

Julliard graduate Niv Ashkenazi is the only North American musician allowed to keep and play an instrument from the *Violins of Hope* collection. He chose the one above.

restored 87 violins from the Holocaust. Some of the original owners outlasted the Nazis' extermination of 6 million Jews during World War II; others died; still others met unknown fates.

"The restored violins are a symbol of survival, the resilience of the Jews to overcome adversity and the power of the human spirit to move from darkness to light, succeed and triumph," says Susanne Reyto, chair and organizer of *Violins of Hope* Los Angeles.

Reyto survived the Holocaust as an infant, only to be imprisoned as a 5-year-old, with her parents, for trying to escape Communist Hungary; they eventually did flee. "Music is an important part of life," she says. "When words fail, music succeeds."

Reyto had been writing and speaking about hope and survival when her friend Geri Morguelan told her about the violins and suggested she bring them to Los Angeles;

COURTESY NIV ASHKENAZI



Morguelan became project co-chair. Reyto assembled key participants and worked with them and Avshalom “Avshi” Weinstein to create the roster of events.

Weinstein’s grandparents, violinist Moshe and pianist Golda, left Europe prior to World War II and opened a violin shop in Tel Aviv. His father, Amnon, began restoring violins rescued from the Holocaust in memory of almost 400 family members who had died at the hands of the Nazis. Holocaust survivors would drop them off at the shop, telling their stories and saying the memories were too painful for them to keep the instruments.

Amnon and Avshi created Violins of Hope, which became the topic of a book by James A. Grymes and a documentary. Grymes participates in programs including one at the Long Beach Aquarium April 21; the documentary screens free of charge at the Wallis in Beverly Hills April 2, with ticket priority given to patrons of a concert by Delirium Musicum that follows.

“Do you know why it was the violin in particular?” Reyto says. “It’s because when the Jews had to flee, it was something that was easy to pick up. It was portable.” Music was significant in the camps, played when inmates arrived and when they were sent to their deaths. One violin brought to the Weinsteins’ workshop still had black crematorium ashes inside.

Avshi Weinstein, who has a violin shop in Istanbul, says that the organizers in the various cities where

The Violins of Hope instruments were restored by Amnon Weinstein, above, and son Avshalom in Tel Aviv. Below: Delirium Musicum.

the Violins of Hope project has traveled are free to offer what programs they wish—with one exception: “We don’t play [Richard] Wagner,” he notes, speaking of the notoriously anti-Semitic composer. Though the technique involved in restoring the violins is no different than that for any other, “for the ones in very bad condition, you realize what they had to go through. You can’t pull them apart.”

Reyto collaborated with Gary S. Greene, founder-music director of the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic and a violinist himself, and Noreen Green, founder and artistic director of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony.

Green, in turn, brought on board Thor Steingraber, executive director of the Soraya in Northridge, which hosts three concerts and numerous school programs.

The opening night concert, March 22 at the Soraya, features the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, violinist Lindsay Deutsch and cellist Lynn Harrell. The program includes the *Schindler’s List* Suite, Ernest Bloch’s *Baal Shem* Suite, Max Bruch’s *Kol Nidrei* and Sid Robinovitch’s Suite for Klezmer Band and Orchestra.

“Our mission is to perform music of the Jewish experience,” Green says. “In that sense, the program created

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itself." On the other hand, she says, "Holocaust music is not easy to do. I decided it would be music about survival and the 'triumph of the spirit.'" That phrase is a reference to the name of a movie about a Jewish boxer at Auschwitz.

She usually thinks of a program as a meal, with a dessert to leave the audience in good spirits. "How do you do that with a Holocaust program?" Green asks rhetorically. She chose the klezmer music—"Jewish Dixieland," she says.

Also performing at the Soraya are the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra (March 25) and the Jerusalem Quartet (April 5). Green is also involved in a play with music by the Jewish Women's Theatre—*Stories of the Violins of Hope*, April 19 at Temple Isaiah in West Los Angeles, that tells some of the violin owners' stories.

The L.A. Lawyers Philharmonic and Legal Voices chorus perform March 29 at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre. The program includes works by composers whose music was heard in the camps, among them Mozart, Mendelssohn and Verdi; music by composers who fled Nazi Europe, such as Kurt Weill; and later Jewish-themed music from *Exodus* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. It begins with "The Star Spangled Banner," an arrangement played with reverence rather than bombast, Greene says.

One particularly poignant piece is *Tsen Brider* (Ten Brothers), a choral work by camp inmate Martin Rosenberg, who felt he would not survive but wanted to write music that would bring others in the camp together. He died in Auschwitz in 1943.