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# Composer makes new music to honor mentors, friends

by Rick Schultz 3 hours ago

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Composer Russell Steinberg. Photo by Bettie Robertson

As a baby boomer, composer Russell Steinberg has lived long enough to see admired mentors and friends pass away. Instead of falling into a deep funk, however, Steinberg decided the best way to honor those who inspired him was to take his composing career, begun when he was 10 years old, to another level.

Acknowledged as an effective teacher and conductor — he is artistic and executive director of the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra — Steinberg is also a popular pre-concert speaker at venues such as Walt Disney Concert Hall and for the New West Symphony. He said a recent burst of creativity, which began last September, owes a lot to Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, especially the rabbi's 2001 book, "Finding Each Other in Judaism: Meditations on the Rites of Passage From Birth to Immortality."

For Steinberg, Schulweis became an invaluable midlife inspiration. He realized, to paraphrase one of Schulweis' meditations, "It Is Never Too Late," that it was never too late to alter his world by opening himself "to curative forces buried within / to hidden energies / the powers in my interior self."

Steinberg has turned the rabbi's words into reality. Within the next two months, the composer will experience the premieres of three works. First up, on April 25, is an orchestral piece, "Cosmic Dust," at the Oxnard Performing Arts Center. Commissioned by the New West

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Symphony, “Cosmic Dust” opens a program, conducted by Marcelo Lehninger, that includes Chopin’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor, with Sonia Goulart as soloist, and Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5.

The program repeats on April 26 at Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, and the following day at Barnum Hall in Santa Monica.

During a wide-ranging conversation at a Westside coffee house, Steinberg talked about his new scores: “Cosmic Dust”; String Quartet No. 2; and “Sacred Transitions,” a song cycle based on meditations by Schulweis.

“I went to a service two or three years ago at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino and had an inspiring moment,” Steinberg said, recalling how hearing Schulweis speak about mortality and our fascination with astronomy set “Cosmic Dust” in motion.

“‘Dust,’ the rabbi said, ‘comes from the stars,’ ” Steinberg recalled. “There is something divine in us. There is the sense that when we look at the stars, we’re looking at a piece of ourselves.”

The 12-minute score, in four sections — with titles such as “Magic Sky” and “Interstellar Dust” — includes some challenging passages. Steinberg noted one effect in the second section, “Shooting Stars,” that asks for *ricochet glissandi*, in which string players throw their bows against the strings, “almost like skipping rocks over water.”

“It’s kind of my ‘La Mer’ for the heavens,” Steinberg said, referring to Debussy’s famous symphonic celebration of the sea, “with the final section, ‘Nova,’ a joyful fanfare.”

At the Oxnard and Thousand Oaks performances, Steinberg said, members of the Conejo Valley Youth Orchestras will perform side by side with New West Symphony pros, accompanied by projected images from the Hubble Space Telescope.

The premiere of Steinberg’s String Quartet No. 2, performed by the Lyric Quartet, will be featured on May 3 at the First Lutheran Church of Venice. It’s part of the esteemed Hear Now Festival of New Music by Contemporary Los Angeles Composers, which begins May 2 at the Miles Memorial Playhouse in Santa Monica.

Hugh Levick, founder and artistic director of the festival, now in its fourth year, called Steinberg’s second string quartet “more accomplished” than his first, which was given its premiere at the festival in 2011.

“There’s no one way to write music anymore,” Levick said. “We look for innovation and the unexpected, and Steinberg’s quartet has an angular, jagged quality, with wonderful texture and quiet passages.”

Steinberg grew up in the San Fernando Valley, earned his doctorate in music at Harvard and studied with composers such as Leon Kirchner and Arthur Berger. He is a pianist and gifted classical guitarist who wrote a piece at age 17 for Andres Segovia. After hearing it, the great classical guitarist was encouraging, suggesting he “learn more about form” by studying Mozart.

“It was my first real validation as a composer,” Steinberg said. “It changed my life.”

With Kirchner and Berger now gone — as well as the likes of Eve Cohen, former program director at the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra — Steinberg’s life as a composer entered a new phase.

"I would say that the intense activity and focus on composition that I've begun since last September, what I'm teasingly calling 'Year One' to myself and friends, is a direct reaction to the many great people who have died in recent years, beginning with Kirchner and extending to this last year with my father and Eve," Steinberg wrote in a follow-up e-mail. "Roy Travis, an emeritus UCLA composition professor, passed away with little fanfare, and family members are lost about what to do with his music. That impressed upon me how important it is for us composers today not to, in any sense, *wait* to be discovered. It's up to us (me)."

Steinberg said he was "excited but nervous" when the rabbi, now 89, listened to a run-through of his "Sacred Transitions," eight songs based on selected meditations from the rabbi's "Finding Each Other in Judaism" set for voice, violin and piano.

"I set the rabbi's texts as art songs, the most intimate form of chamber music," Steinberg recalled. "I wanted the cycle to have some of the feel of Schubert's 'Winterreise.' " After the rendition, Schulweis seemed unmoved.

Steinberg said he did not reconsider his approach because "the rabbi's words are too deep and complex" to render in more folk or pop-like forms.

Listeners can judge for themselves on May 28 when the premiere of "Sacred Transitions" takes place at Valley Beth Shalom. Steinberg on piano will accompany mezzo-soprano Diana Tash, with Mitchell Newman on violin.

One of the rabbi's meditations especially close to Steinberg's heart is placed sixth in the composer's song cycle. "Playing With Three Strings" describes how violinist Itzhak Perlman broke a string during a performance but continued playing brilliantly. The end of the meditation quotes Perlman telling his appreciative audience, "It is my task to make music with what remains." The rabbi concludes, "A legacy mightier than a concert. / Make music with what remains."

"So I made my music a priority," Steinberg said. "I saw my mentors dying, their works unknown. What do we do it for? It's not vanity. I realized that what we do is important, and I was sick and tired of my own insecurity. I've got an important voice, and it's amazing how the world has listened."

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