Gary Lindsay
Houston Symphony Examiner
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Houston Symphony: Kaddish - 'I Am Here'

November 27th, 2010 8:28 pm CT

Houston Symphony & Holocaust Museum Houston: Kaddish
Photo: Holocaust Museum Houston

Slideshow: Survivors and Artists of Houston Symphony: Kaddish - 'I Am Here'

Video: Kaddish Song

A Song From The Kaddish Symphony by Composer Lawrence Siegel

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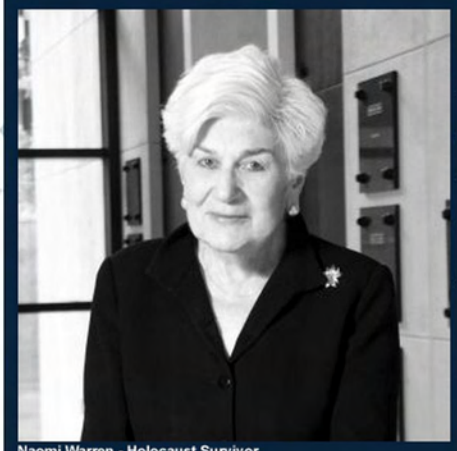
Tuesday, November 23, 2010 was a particularly historic day in the music world, because in partnership with the **Holocaust Museum Houston**, it was the **Houston Symphony** and **Houston Symphony Chorus** single performance world premiere of the full symphony version of *Kaddish* "I Am Here" for full-orchestra and chorus.

From the Program Notes:

> "The *Kaddish* Project was created to bring attention to the intentional and systematic destruction of individuals and entire cultures throughout the world. It illustrates a specific moment in history while illuminating the Holocaust as a profound human tragedy – one whose implications extend beyond the Jewish experience to concern all people everywhere."
>
> "Written and composed by Lawrence Siegel, Kaddish is originally an hour-long oratorio for chorus, soloists and chamber orchestra, whose texts come verbatim from the testimony of Holocaust survivors. The work is intended to raise awareness and address the issue of genocide as an ongoing global crisis."
>
> "The Houston Symphony has worked with composer Lawrence Siegel over the past two years to re-score the music for full symphony and chorus. This performance is the world premiere of the full-orchestra version commissioned by the Houston Symphony."

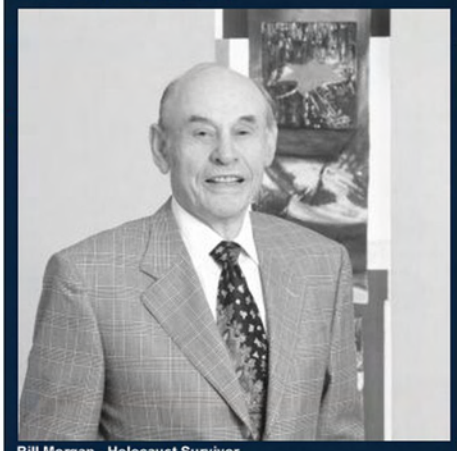
Being that *Kaddish* is based in large part on the personal testimony of four Holocaust survivors who live in Houston, the **Houston Symphony** approached composer **Lawrence Siegel** about re-scoring the original chamber orchestra score for a full symphony, so that it could be performed in Houston, with the **Houston Symphony** and **Houston Symphony Chorus**.

Artists of Kaddish



Naomi Warren - Holocaust Survivor
Credit: Courtesy of Houston Symphony

Celina Fein - Holocaust Survivor
Credit: Courtesy of Houston Symphony



Bill Morgan - Holocaust Survivor
Credit: Courtesy of Houston Symphony

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Examiner.com was able to speak to Mr. Siegel prior to the concert about the project:

GL: "Mr. Siegel, were there any specific challenges in re-scoring the original chamber orchestra composition for a full symphony?"

Lawrence Siegel: "Actually, I had always imagined it as a fully orchestrated work. It was more of a challenge to bring the scope of the scoring down and compress it into the original chamber orchestra format. It was very liberating and satisfying in working with the **Houston Symphony** to be able to finally orchestrate *Kaddish* into the full range composition that I had originally heard in my mind, and had always imagined."

The program began with a before-concert *Prelude* with composer **Lawrence Siegel** interviewing Houston Holocaust Survivor **Naomi Warren**, the content of which will appear in a future article.

Before presenting *Kaddish*, the concert began with a selection of two Hebrew-themed works, the first being Prokofiev's *Overture on Hebrew Themes, Opus 34*, which is an exuberantly cheerful piece, with light, airy, and bouncy melodic themes, building to a rousing finale.

Next the orchestra reset for cello soloist **Brinton Averil Smith**, who also happens to be the **Houston Symphony** principal cellist, who performed *Kol Nidrei, Adagio on Hebrew Melodies for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 47*, by Bruch. This piece began with a very somber solo cello opening, and then as the orchestra joined in it built into a grand and stately yet still melancholy hymn, intertwining with the sinuous cello which at times sounded like a rich and deeply articulated violin in the masterful hands of Mr. Smith, until the composition slowed down into a beautiful, delicate, and lingeringly sweet, high-toned ending. A wonderful, rich piece, expertly performed by both soloist and orchestra.

After the intermission came *Kaddish*, which enough cannot be said about. It was sweet, shocking, melancholy, uplifting, horrific, and finally, powerfully triumpant. With several Holocaust survivors present being introduced from the audience, then the grand and dramatic production with the full **Houston Symphony**, the full **Houston Symphony Chorus**, plus the four singing narrative **soloists**, all under the steady hand of Maestro **Hans Graf**, it was a large, moving, stupendous production.

Walter Kase - Holocaust Survivor
Credit: Courtesy of Houston Symphony

Margaret Lattimore, mezzo-soprano
Credit: Harry Heliotis

Jessica Rivera, soprano
Credit: Ken Howard

It had the dramatic intensity and weight of the largest and most dramatic grand operas. But unlike opera, which is usually based on legend or mythology, this is "real." It is the "truth." It is history. And we know this because it is a *first person testimonial* by people still living, several of whom were present in the room that night. The first person testimonials being sung powerfully by the **vocal soloists**, echoed by the expansive and soaring **Houston Symphony Chorus** behind them.

Most of us only know the Holocaust from documentary footage, or from narrative motion pictures. But *Kaddish* is not a documentary. Not a fiction. It is a very personal testimony from several people who lived through it, and it is alternately poetic, angry, wistful, horrific, melancholic, and humanly philosophical. It is a story that questions faith and destiny, while recounting memories of events that were haunting, disturbing, horrible, disgusting, and shameful.

It is an unforgivable story. It is a practically *unbelievable* story, that human beings could ever act so cruelly...and yet it is still told in an overwhelmingly human, real, and heartfelt way.

A very powerful moment toward the end was when a littany of real non-survivor names was read en masse in overlapping fashion by the **Houston Symphony Chorus**. Starting with everyone, then just the women, then everyone again, then just the women again. Then fewer and fewer women's voices, until finally there was just one...and then it too, was silent.

Haunting.

This is also a bigger story than we usually see. It covers the saga from before WWII, and during WWII, and after WWII, and until today. We get the feeling of experiencing the entire story cycle, from before...to now. It is a huge story.

Yes, the chorus sounded beautiful. And yes, the symphony sounded wonderful. And yes, the soloists sang powerfully and movingly. But it is all in the service of telling this horrific, and yet ultimately courageous and heroic story. In this respect the star of the show must be **Lawrence Siegel** and his amazing, classically oratorial, symphonic, compositional achievement. And yet even Mr. Siegel does not do this for himself. He does it for the Holocaust survivors, and for all the people who did not survive the Holocaust. And to tell this horrible story, in the most artistically beautiful way possible, so that people can understand what happened. He succeeded admirably. Plus he had a lot of very talented help along the way, and in this amazing performance. It is an unquestioned triumph. And extremely emotional to sit through.

How does one feel good after seeing and hearing a performance like this? Because ultimately it is a story of triumph.

The best feeling that can be taken away from this story, and this extraordinary historical musical event, is that:

...the evil criminals, did...not...win.

Chad Shelton, tenor
Credit: Courtesy of Houston Symphony

James Maddelena, baritone
Credit: Katrin Talbot

Brinton Averil Smith, principal cellist, Houston Symphony
Credit: Sandy Lankford

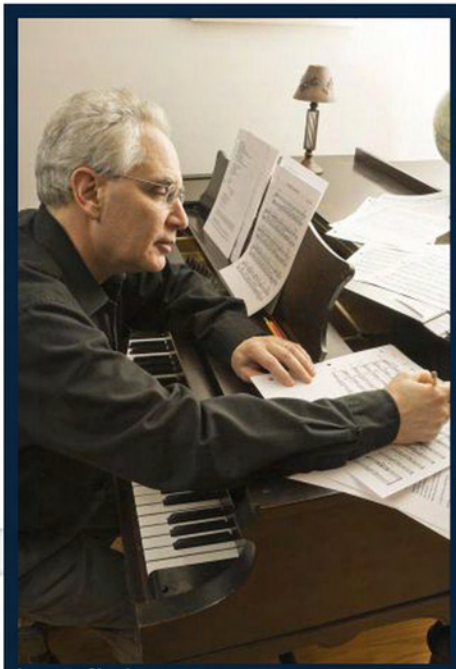
The Survivors Won.

And ***Bravo!*** to them...

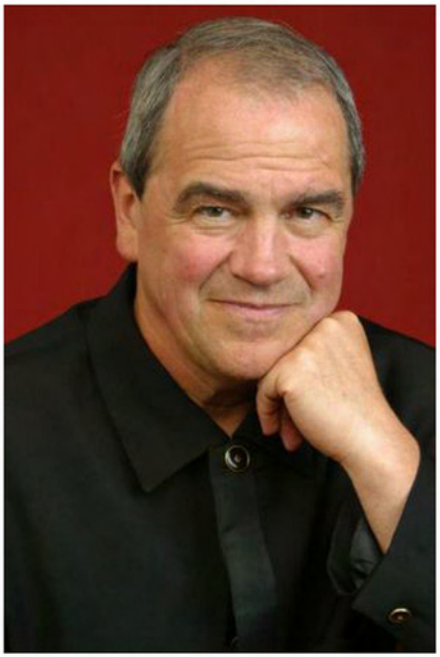
Contact Gary at: garylindsay.examiner@gmail.com

Suggested by the author:

- Houston Symphony: Bartók's Miraculous Mandarin
- Houston Symphony: Hannu Lintu Conducts Beethoven's Eroica Symphony
- Houston Symphony: Lunada™ 2010 - 'A Concert of Latin American Music'
- Houston Symphony: The Planets - An HD Odyssey, 2010 UK Tour
- Houston Symphony: Joshua Bell's Mendelssohn



Lawrence Siegel, composer
Credit: Mark Corliss



Hans Graf, Music Director - Houston Symphony
Credit: Courtesy of Houston Symphony

Charles Hausmann, Director - Houston Symphony Chorus
Credit: Courtesy of Houston Symphony Chorus