

CD: Review

“Kol Nidrei & Beyond: Lev's Story”**Brian Thornton, cello, with Spencer Myer, piano**

by Daniel Hathaway



Lev Aronson was a Latvian cellist who managed during the Nazi regime to survive slave labor, the confiscation of his instruments and internment in the concentration camp at Stutthof. After being rescued by the Soviets, he was re-imprisoned, miraculously escaped and made his way to the American Zone. After the War, he became principal cellist of the Dallas Symphony and, as a celebrated teacher, profoundly influenced a number of young cellists including Lynn Harrell, Ralph Kirchbaum and Brian Thornton. He died in 1988 (*The Lost Cellos of Lev Aronson*, a book about his life by Frances Brent, was published in 2009).

Thornton, a member of The Cleveland Orchestra, has launched a project to honor Lev Aronson's legacy with an annual festival at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, set to launch on June 10, a CD to be released today, May 29, and a forthcoming series of concerts in temples and synagogues.

The CD, *Kol Nidrei & Beyond: Lev's Story* is an evocative, living memorial to a great cellist told through wordless songs: original music by Max Bruch (his setting of *Kol Nidrei*), Sergei Rachmaninoff (*Vocalise*) and Ernest Bloch (*Prayer* from *Jewish Life, No. 1*), Yuriy Leonovich's *Fantasia on Themes from Dvorak's 'Rusalka'*, four of Aronson's arrangements (a Hassidic dance, Ansky's *Mipnei ma*, Bloch's *Abodah* and Lavry's *Kinereth*), and Patrick Zimmerli's five-movement *Sonata “Kol Nidrei”* for solo cello which Thornton commissioned especially for the project. Spencer Myer is the excellent pianist.



Bruch and Bloch form the musical bookends of this attractive album. The Bruch is a familiar item to which Thornton brings a warm, intense tone, beautifully supported by Spencer Myer's lyrical piano lines. The two go on to condense a whole Dvořák opera into fifteen and a half colorful minutes in the *Rusalka* fantasia that follows and set a lovely, brisk but supple tempo for the Rachmaninoff that makes an old warhorse sound fresh. The four Aronson arrangements

are charmingly varied, ranging from a Klezmer-infused dance to a song from the Jewish play, *Dybbuk*, Jewish ritual music, and a song about the Sea of Galilee reduced down from Marc Lavry's original setting for soprano and orchestra. The CD ends with Bloch's soulful *Prayer*, played with deep intensity by Thornton and Myer.

But just before *Prayer* comes perhaps the most fascinating piece on the album: Zimmerli's *Sonata*. The New York-based composer notes that he “writes a sophisticated yet approachable hybrid of jazz and classical music,” and here the subject is the Hebrew prayer *Kol Nidrei*, which Zimmerli took pains to analyze both as a confessional prayer and in its various settings in classical music. During the course of the sonata, the tune is never far from the surface, even when deconstructed and tossed about over pizzicatos in the third movement. Immediately attractive, Zimmerli's *Sonata* is not only the central piece on this album but also a major contribution to the literature for unaccompanied cello. Thornton puts it across masterfully.

In addition to the splendid performers out in front, the album has a winning team behind it: Five/Four Productions' Thomas Moore and Michael Bishop were recording producer and editor and recording and mastering engineer for the sessions, which were held in Reinberger Chamber Music Hall at Severance Hall. You feel like you're sitting in the third row. The beautiful insert, designed by Jose Infante, features original art by Giancarlo Calicchia. On May 29, the disc will be available for download from CD Baby and iTunes.

Published on clevelandclassical.com May 29, 2013