

Niv Ashkenazi: Violins of Hope

Niv Ashkenazi, *violin*
Matthew Graybil, *piano*

WORKS BY ROBERT DAUBER | ERNEST BLOCH |
JOHN WILLIAMS | JULIUS CHAJES | SHARON FARBER
| SZYMON LAKS | GEORGE PERLMAN | PAUL BEN-HAIM |
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Introduction

Violins of Hope is an artistic and educational project composed of instruments that were owned by Jewish musicians before and during the Holocaust. Violins in the collection were played in the concentration camps and ghettos, providing a source of comfort for some and a means of survival for others. Above all, the instruments represented strength and optimism for the future during mankind's darkest hour. Wherever there was music, there was hope.

The project was founded by Amnon Weinstein and his son Avshalom Weinstein, Israeli luthiers who collect the instruments, refurbish them to concert quality, and bring them to communities all over the world. The Violins of Hope have traveled to Jerusalem, Sion, Madrid, Maastricht, Monaco, Rome, Berlin, London, Bucharest, Dachau, Dresden, and Auschwitz. In the United States, the project has been presented in Charlotte, Cleveland, Houston, Jacksonville, Sarasota, Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, Nashville, Birmingham, Knoxville, Phoenix, Louisville, Fort Wayne, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. A typical residency includes an exhibition, performances, and educational programs.

Although the instruments make beautiful museum pieces, at the heart of the Violins of Hope project is the Weinstains' commitment to ensuring that the instruments are played again. While some of the musicians who originally owned the Violins of Hope may have been silenced by the Holocaust, their voices and spirits live on through performances on their instruments. The Violins of Hope have been played by virtuosos such as Shlomo Mintz and Daniel Hope, and revered ensembles such as the Berlin Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra. Niv Ashkenazi is the only violinist in the world to hold an instrument from the Violins of Hope collection on a long-term loan.

—James A. Grymes, author of *Violins of Hope*



A note from the Weinstein family

Violins of Hope is a musical project aimed at restoring violins owned by Jewish musicians during the Holocaust, and having them played in the best music halls by the best violin players, with love and sensitivity. Niv Ashkenazi fits our concerts perfectly. He plays with professional expertise, love, and a deep sensitivity.

We met Niv a few years ago in Sarasota, Florida, and fell in love with his determination and gusto. Niv is the only violinist we trust absolutely to bring out the sounds of long gone horrors, in an honest sound and with much love to music and our legacy.

A note from Niv Ashkenazi

I first became involved with Violins of Hope in 2017. As an alum of the Perlman Music Program, I was invited to join several other musicians performing on instruments from the collection in recitals and educational programs for Violins of Hope Sarasota. Shortly afterwards, this developed into a long-term collaboration and I received the violin used on this album on long-term loan. Since that time I have been playing on it for Violins of Hope events as well as for other special projects. In most Violins of Hope events, musicians have a limited time with each instrument. I have been given a unique opportunity to develop a relationship with this special instrument and its voice.

One of the missions of Violins of Hope is to help silenced voices be heard again. This album is intended to create a permanent chronicle of that voice so it is never again silenced. The violin was built between 1900-1929 in eastern Europe or Germany. I have chosen Jewish repertoire from throughout its lifetime: the earliest piece, Bloch's *Nigun*, was written in 1923. The most recent piece is Sharon Farber's arrangement of a movement from her cello concerto *Bestemming*, commissioned especially for this recording. Like the instruments in the Violins of Hope collection, most of these composers were affected by the Holocaust, many directly so.

For this recording, I played on a bow made by Daniel Schmidt, who worked in the Weinstein shop in Tel Aviv in the 1990s. I bought the bow in 2017, and only learned several years later that Daniel Schmidt played a key role in encouraging Amnon Weinstein to begin work with the collection of instruments.

The Music

Serenade: Robert Dauber

This *Serenade* is the only surviving work by Robert Dauber. It was composed in 1942, while he was in Theresienstadt, where he took an active role in the musical life—as well as composing, he played cello in the camp. He was the son of Dol (Adolf) Dauber, an internationally famous jazz violinist and bandleader, and his father's influence may be heard in the style of the *Serenade*. Robert Dauber was transported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, and from there to Dachau, where he died of typhoid in 1945, shortly before the end of the war.

Nigun: Ernest Bloch

Perhaps no composer represents Jewish classical music better than the Swiss composer Ernest Bloch, who was one of a number of composers of the early 20th century creating what we now know as the “Jewish sound.” Bloch was born to Jewish parents and had a strong religious upbringing; at one point his father wanted to become a rabbi. Most of Bloch's iconic Jewish works were written in the 1910s and 1920s. *Nigun*, a title that references an improvised melody, is part of the *Baal Shem* suite and was written while Bloch was living in the United States. He returned to Europe in the 1930s, but was forced to return to the United States once more in 1939 as the political climate worsened, and lived there until his death in 1959.

Theme from “Schindler’s List”: John Williams

This iconic melody from the Oscar-winning film was written for Itzhak Perlman. Instantly recognizable, it simultaneously evokes hope, tragedy, and remembrance. I first performed it while studying with Perlman during my master’s degree at Juilliard. He encouraged me to develop my own interpretation of the piece, refusing to share his bowings and fingerings. At that time, it was frustrating, but in the years since, I’ve greatly appreciated that permission to find my own voice with it.

The Chassid: Julius Chajes

Julius Chajes was born in Lvov, and was an accomplished pianist—his mother was his first teacher. In the 1930s, he fled Europe along with his family to escape the rise of Nazism. He first emigrated to Israel (then Palestine), where he became deeply inspired by the music that he heard there. In 1937 he moved to Detroit, where for the remainder of his career he dedicated himself to writing Jewish music, much of which was inspired by the sounds he heard for the short time he spent in Israel.

Bestemming: Triumph: Sharon Farber

Award-winning composer Sharon Farber’s concerto for cello, narrator, and orchestra tells the story of her dear friend Curt Lowens, a Holocaust survivor and hero of the Dutch Resistance who saved more than 150 Jewish children, as well as two downed American airmen. For this album, I was honored to have Sharon arrange the final movement of her concerto, “Triumph,” for violin, piano four-hands, and narrator. Sharon joined us on the piano for the recording. Curt Lowens, who performed as the narrator for the concerto’s premier, passed away in 2017. For this recording, the actor Tony Campisi generously agreed to be our narrator.

Trois pièces de concert: Szymon Laks

Szymon Laks was a Polish composer whose successful career in Paris was cut short in 1941, when he was arrested and sent to Auschwitz. While in Auschwitz, he served as the concertmaster of the Birkenau Men’s Camp Orchestra, and managed to survive and even advocate for his fellow musicians, although many died from disease, suicide, and the gas chambers. His story is featured in James A. Grymes’s book, *Violins of Hope*. Unlike many musicians and composers who survived the Holocaust, he resumed his career as a composer after the end of the war. Many of his manuscripts from the first part of his career were destroyed—he wrote this set of concert pieces for both cello and violin, but only the cello version survived. The violin version was reconstructed in 2010 by Judith Ingolfsson.

Dance of the Rebbitzen: George Perlman

George Perlman was born in Kiev and emigrated to America at the age of four. He spent his entire career in Chicago, and continued to teach violin until two months before his death in 2000 at the age of 103. Many of his compositions were influenced by his Jewish heritage. *Dance of the Rebbitzen*, the second movement of his *Suite hebraïque*, is dedicated to Yehudi Menuhin. In 1945, after the end of World War II, Menuhin, accompanied by Benjamin Britten on piano, traveled to Europe to play for recently liberated survivors.

Berceuse sfaradite: Paul Ben-Haim

Three Songs Without Words: Paul Ben-Haim

Paul Ben-Haim was born in Munich as Paul Frankenburger, and emigrated to Palestine in 1933 when he was no longer able to work in Germany. He became a leader among the first generation of Israeli composers, and his music was and is widely performed. The *Berceuse sfaradite* (Sephardic Lullaby) is an arrangement of a Sephardic folk song. The *Three Songs Without Words* describe Middle Eastern

scenes: the relentless heat of the Judean desert, the babbling of a storyteller, and another setting of a traditional Sephardic melody.

***Kaddisch*: Maurice Ravel**

While the Kaddish (“holy”) is a prayer found in multiple places throughout the Jewish service, the name is most associated with the Mourner’s Kaddish. Ravel, who often drew upon other cultures in his compositions, set part of the text of the Aramaic prayer for voice and piano in 1914, as part of *Deux melodies hebraïques*.

Performers



Virtuoso violinist **Niv Ashkenazi** has captivated audiences with his heartfelt musicianship and emotional performances. Praised for his “lush sound” and “passionate playing” (CASA Magazine) and “formidable technical powers” (Santa Barbara News-Press), he has made several Carnegie Hall and Kennedy Center appearances, and has performed in Europe, the Middle East, and across North America. His conviction that the impact of music serves

people beyond the concert stage motivates him to collaborate on projects that create a strong emotional bond with his audience.

In the 2019-2020 season, he was the first ever Artist in Residence at the Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts (The Soraya). He has appeared as a soloist with the Long Beach Symphony, Culver City Symphony Orchestra, and Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra, among others. As a chamber musician, he has performed with members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Juilliard String Quartet, Cavani Quartet, and Ariel Quartet, as well as performing in Dyad, a violin and bassoon duo with his wife Leah Kohn. Also active as an educator, he has been

a guest artist and given master classes at La Sierra University, California State University, Northridge, and Westmont College.

Ashkenazi’s involvement with Violins of Hope began with a residency in Sarasota, Florida through the Perlman Music Program. The work has since taken him to Ottawa, New Jersey, Connecticut, San Francisco, and Los Angeles for performances and educational engagements.

His desire to serve the community has led him to work with a number of varied organizations. He is a core member of Street Symphony, an LA-based nonprofit which places social justice at the heart of music making and serves communities disenfranchised by homelessness and incarceration in Los Angeles County. He serves on the professional advisory board of Shane’s Inspiration, a global nonprofit organization dedicated to building inclusive playgrounds, and he formerly served on the board of the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra.

Ashkenazi holds both a B.M. and M.M. from The Juilliard School, where his primary teachers were Itzhak Perlman, Glenn Dicterow, Ronald Copes, and Stephen Clapp.



Praised by The New Yorker as an “exceptional young artist” and as a “major talent” by the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, American pianist **Matthew Graybil** has performed throughout the United States, Canada and Europe in venues such as Carnegie’s Weill Recital Hall, Le Poisson Rouge, Verizon Hall at the Kimmel Center and Lincoln Center. He has appeared on radio and television, including WNYC, WQXR, WWFM, CBS

Chicago, the Discovery Channel, and PBS.

Since making his orchestral debut at age 14, he has performed with the Fort Worth Symphony and the National Chamber Players among many others. An avid chamber musician, he has been invited to festivals including the American

Academy in Fontainebleau, the Ravinia Steans Institute, the Sarasota Music Festival and the Perlman Music Program. Artists with whom he has collaborated include Itzhak Perlman, the Enso String Quartet, and the Ulysses String Quartet.

He has been a prize-winner in the MTNA/Yamaha National Piano Competition, the New York Piano Competition, the National Foundation for the Advancement of the Arts, the Juilliard Gina Bachauer Competition, the Missouri Southern International Piano Competition, and the Wideman International Piano Competition.

Graybil was a pupil of Harvey Wedeen for six years and completed his Bachelor's and Master's degrees at The Juilliard School, where he worked with Jerome Lowenthal and Matti Raekallio.



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