



WOMEN OF VALOR
by Andrea Clearfield

Women of Valor is a celebration of women from the Old Testament. The cantata was inspired by a midrash (biblical commentary) on Proverbs where each line of the biblical text from Proverbs 31 represents a biblical woman. The hour-long work is scored for soprano and 1 or 2 mezzo-soprano soloists, narrator and symphony orchestra. It was given its world premiere in Los Angeles on April 16th, 2000 by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony under the direction of Dr. Noreen Green and was favorably reviewed in the Los Angeles Times. Soloists were Hila Plittman, soprano and Gail Dubinbaum, mezzo-soprano, and the narrator was noted television actress Valerie Harper. The performance was sponsored by Hadassah Southern California, who created educational programs around the work. A story on *Women of Valor* was broadcast nationally on NPR's All Things Considered in April, 2000. "Ruth's Aria" was awarded First Prize in the Classical Category of the American Jewish Music Festival 2000 Competition. The chamber version of *Women of Valor* is scored for soprano and mezzo-soprano soloists, violin, Middle Eastern percussion, piano and narrator and has been performed at the University of Pennsylvania as part of the international colloquium "Jewish Biblical Interpretation in Comparative Context" sponsored by the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies and at numerous synagogues. "Hannah's Prayer" ("Prayer") for soprano, harp and string orchestra has been performed at the Liacoras Center in Philadelphia at the Opening Ceremonies for the National Maccabi Games in honor of the Munich 11 athletes and was also performed in the fall of 2001 in Beverly Hills as a memorial to those who died on September 11, 2001. "Jocheved" is arranged for women's chorus and has been performed in England, Germany and the U.S. by the Lady Chapel Singers and is published in the Episcopal Church Hymnal Supplement "Voices Found: Women in the Church's Song" by Church Publishing. The arias from *Women of Valor* are also arranged for voice with piano accompaniment. The Lehigh Valley Orchestra presented the East Coast premiere of *Women of Valor* in January, 2004 in Allentown, Pennsylvania sponsored by the Jewish/Christian Institute for Understanding, and an arrangement of the work for chamber orchestra was performed by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony in March, 2004 with celebrity narrator, Laraine Newman. The orchestral version of *Women of Valor* is published by Oxford University Press. Choral, chamber and voice and piano arrangements are published by Andrea Clearfield. CD's are available upon request (aclearfield@gmail.com).

Texts for *Women of Valor* are drawn both from the Bible and from modern poems and prose. The Biblical texts include portions from Genesis, Judges, The Book of Esther as well as the entire "Eishet Hayil" (literally "A Woman of Valor") poem from Proverbs, sung and narrated in English, Hebrew and Yiddish. The work is composed in three large sections, each including recitatives, arias, duets, narrated portions and orchestral interludes, similar to an oratorio. The *Eishet Hayil* text comprises the recitatives, and the arias are the stories of biblical women from the perspective of ten contemporary women writers. *Women of Valor* highlights the stories of Sarah, Leah, Rachel, Jocheved, Miriam, Hannah, Jael, Michal, Ruth and Esther. Texts are by Alicia Ostriker, Marge Piercy, Rivka Miriam (translated from the Hebrew by Linda Zisquit), "Rachel" (translated from the Hebrew by Robert Friend), Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael, Sandy Shanin, Roza Yakubovitsh (translated from the Yiddish by Kathryn Hellerstein), Isidor Lillian, Ellen Frankel and Andrea Clearfield.

The musical material for *Women of Valor* incorporates ancient Hebrew synagogue chants as well as other traditional melodies which are sung to the *Eishet Hayil* text. These melodies are woven through the piece like a tapestry, connecting threads between the old and the new. A

Renaissance technique, *soggetto cavato dalle vocali*, was employed where a theme is carved out from the vowels of a phrase. Thus, the theme for the oratorio was created from the vowels of "Women of Valor" where o-e-o-a-o becomes do-re-do-fa-sol. Likewise, the longer version of the theme, do-re-do-fa-sol-sol-la-ti, is derived from the vowels of the words "Women of Valor, Who Can Find?" and rises like this question from the opening of Proverbs 31. Heard in a multiplicity of forms, this theme pervades the work. Another structural element is shaped by the acrostic nature of Proverbs 31, which uses each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. *Women of Valor* employs a 22-note scale which was devised from three synagogue prayer modes, providing a musical representation of the literary acrostic. Each line of the biblical text is sung on a consecutive degree of the scale, preceded by a chime tone.

While not an authentic representation of any traditional ritual, prayer or musical style, *Women of Valor* is influenced by cantorial ornamentation, biblical instruments, Jewish dance forms and Middle-Eastern and Sephardic music so that these elements became resources for color, melody, rhythm, phrasing and orchestration. Mixed meters, syncopated rhythms, traditional scales and percussion instruments such as the dumbek, rik (small tambourine), finger cymbals and sistrem add a Middle-Eastern ambience to the composition. Portions of ancient melodic patterns, called tropes, sung to the Torah, can be heard in the Sarah, Miriam, Hannah and Ruth arias as well as in fragments and layers in the orchestral prelude and other interludes. The centerpiece of the work, "Miriam's Dance", was inspired by the biblical heroine, Miriam, who led the women in song and dance after the crossing of the Red Sea. Among the tropes woven through the dance is the particular melodic pattern that is chanted to Miriam's "Song of the Sea" in the Book of Exodus.

The biblical stories have been passed down from generation to generation and transformed with each re-telling. Likewise, the music in *Women of Valor* unfolds in continuous variation. By employing a type of polyphony called heterophony, a melody is heard by many instruments simultaneously, each statement differing slightly from the others. Out of this sea of chant, various themes emerge. Strata of musical ideas also represent the rich and complex interpretative layers of the *Eishet Hayil* text. This large-scale work can be likened to a musical midrash which reflects the poetic, colorful, heart-felt, mysterious, evocative and celebratory aspects of the texts.