



Pomona composer strikes an emotional chord with Holocaust service creation

POMONA — When Marci Ficocelli finished singing "My Mamalah," the sound of silent tears filled the room with a resonance befitting the song's subject — the Holocaust.

Michael Ficocelli, Marci's husband, has written the music, lyrics and libretto for an hour-long theatrical production "From Death to Hope," commissioned for the 20th annual Interfaith Holocaust Service to be conducted May 5 at Temple Sharey Tefillo-Israel in South Orange, N.J.

"My Mamalah" is one of the songs that punctuate the narrative; music and words as strong as the train whistles and gunshots that ring out through the piece.

Michael's creation is as much a story of acquiring knowledge and an understanding of the events surrounding the Holocaust as it is a story of his talents that took those ideas and emotions through a 500-hour creative process.

The composer was approached by the temple's cantor, Ted Aaronson, on Dec. 26 to write a musical piece for the community's annual remembrance of the Holocaust. The venue changes annually, and this is the temple's year as host.

The cantor came to Ficocelli's home loaded with Holocaust literature and historical videos of the World War II events. Michael spent an additional two weeks at the Rockland Center for Holocaust Studies in Spring Valley immersing himself in the period.

"Up until this time of study, my knowledge was very peripheral," he said. "I was literally in a state of shock, and had an overwhelming feeling of pathos when I left the center."

"There was nothing else for me to do but go to my keyboard and begin composing," he said. "When I was finished, I realized this was the apex of my life's work to date."

A musical life
The 42-year-old Ficocelli was raised in East Haven, Conn. He obtained a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Boston University in 1977 and a master's degree in music education from the University of Bridgeport in 1982.

He met his future wife in 1980 in a Bridgeport practice room while she was working on her degree ('81) in music and voice.



PEOPLE & PLACES

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Rockland County and graduated from Ramapo High School in 1977.

The pair married in 1982 and moved to Pomona five years ago. They have two children, Barbra, 10, and Eric, 7.

Michael has been teaching music for 15 years, the past 10 in the middle school in Glen Rock, N.J. Marci teaches Hebrew school and music at Temple Sharey Tefillo-Israel and conducts the youth and adult choirs. She is performing in and directing the premiere of her husband's composition.

As Marci & Michael, the couple performs in cabarets and lounges along the East Coast. They have worked at Trump's Castle in Atlantic City, as well as venues from Connecticut to Kentucky. They've had a regular gig at the Woodcliff Lake Hilton (N.J.) for the past 11 years.

They prefer not to dwell too much on their lounge act but concede it is that work that allowed them to buy their home.

Michael's music has been published since 1985, starting with "Thank You For Showing Us the Way," a graduation choral piece, and followed by "Hold On," an inspirational choral piece for high school and college choirs. There's also "Wild Imagining," a 12-song children's musical for middle school youngsters.

Marci wants to do serious vocal performances, with Broadway a distinct possibility, while Michael feels "serious" composing is where he is headed. "From Death to Hope" is the work both feel is moving them closer to their dreams.

"We made a promise to each other 15 years ago that if we made a living, it would be from music," Michael said. "Thus far, it's been a combination of teaching, performing, writing and directing, but we've been true to our promise."

Marci said her husband's dedication to the Holocaust piece overwhelmed the entire family. "The kids heard their father



Interfaith Holocaust Service

- Premiere of "From Death to Hope"
- Temple Sharey Tefillo-Israel, 432 Scotland Road, South Orange, N.J. Telephone: 201-763-4116
- 8 p.m. May 5
- Admission is free and on a first-come, first-seated basis.

■ Music, lyrics and libretto composed by Michael Ficocelli. Soloists and choirs directed by Marci Ficocelli.

■ "From Death to Hope" is a multimedia theater presentation commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and celebrating the lives of the survivors.

■ Directions: Garden State Parkway south to Exit 145 and onto Route 280 West. Follow Route 280 to Exit 10 (Northfield Avenue). Turn left at top of ramp onto Northfield. At third light, turn left onto Gregory Avenue. Continue for 2.2 miles (Gregory becomes Wyoming Avenue) to second light. Turn left onto South Orange Avenue. At fourth light, turn left onto Scotland Road. Temple is six blocks on the right.

composing, heard the sound effects he created on the synthesizer," she said. "This is a cathartic piece and Michael wanted to create something that would not trivialize or gloss over the hor-



Staff photo/Richard Gutwillig

Michael and Marci Ficocelli rehearse the music for an hour-long theatrical production "From Death to Hope," commissioned for the Interfaith Holocaust Service to be held May 5 at Temple Sharey Tefillo-Israel in South Orange, N.J. Michael Ficocelli wrote the music, lyrics and libretto for the production.

rendous nature of the events."

Emotion is focus

The process, both husband and wife agreed, was a painful one, but the end result is, in their minds, exhilarating.

Cantor Aaronson, who will perform in the production, said, "It's an incredible piece and gives a new perspective of the Holocaust. It's not just a cerebral look because viewers are attacked from an emotional standpoint and must grapple with their own emotions."

The cantor added that no matter who we are, Jew or Christian, the Holocaust has affected all of us.

"Eleven million died in the war, only 6 million were Jews. The pain is one everyone has lived through," he said. "Michael's work is authentic and historically correct. It touches feelings and it is impossible not to be moved. I cried my way through every rehearsal, and I feel privileged to perform in it. No one will walk away unchanged."

Marci is using her temple's adult and youth choirs and some professional singers. She had to hire outsiders to portray the SS

men in the cast, as no one in the temple's congregation wanted to play those roles.

"My original thought was this must be a sad piece, but also one with hope," Michael said. "I used some of Viktor Frankl's words from his book 'Man's Search for Meaning.' He was a renowned psychotherapist and survivor of Auschwitz."

"I want listeners to walk away with an enhanced understanding of what happened," he said. "There is a current generation of kids who have grown up with no true feeling of the impact of these events. I want people to be cleansed after taking an emotional bath. To go from horror to hope to responsibility for the future."

Michael sat down at the piano, Marci standing by his side. They played and sang more selections from the score, letting the impact of the words and music make other conversation trivial.

"I've never felt that way before," he said as the music faded away. "I think this piece will strike a nerve, not just in the Jewish community, but in anyone who sees and hears my work."

Richard Gutwillig may be reached at 578-2433.