

Artist of the Month

Michael Cohen: Keeping Anne Frank's Voice Alive Through Music

By Ellen Freed

"We didn't make much fuss about Chanukah; we just gave each other a few trifles, and then we had the candles. Because of the shortage of candles, we only had them alight for ten minutes, but that is alright, as long as you have the song."

— Anne Frank,
December 7, 1942

In 1973, composer Michael Cohen and librettist Enid Futterman began writing a musical work based on *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, the largest selling book in the world, after the Bible. Twelve years later, on October 10, 1985, *Yours, Anne* premiered in New York City with a cast of eight and a storyline that followed the diary's own narrative. Starring the film actress Trini Alvarado in the title role, produced by John Flaxman and directed by Arthur Maxella, *Yours, Anne* ran for several months.

Clive Barnes's review in the *New York Post* carried the title "Anne Frank Musical: It Works," and in *Backstage*, Michael Schaeffer's stated: "Cohen's music is almost seamless in texture, following an opera-like pattern of half-spoken and half sung arias, while Futterman's lyrics speak simply but eloquently."

In actual fact, *Yours, Anne* never really closed, for it spawned a loyal cult following, a song cycle entitled *I Am Anne Frank* written for the renowned actress and cabaret singer, Andrea Marcovicci, and *I Remember*, a chamber work scored for cello, flute, harp and mezzo-soprano. To quote Judah M. Cohen, ethnomusicologist and Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies at New York University on the staying power of this musical tribute: "Yours, Anne has proven to be extraordinarily durable. In the nearly 20 years since its opening, dozens of professional and amateur theater groups have staged the show throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, England, Belgium, and Japan."

The above-mentioned three works represent an ongoing and quite remarkable trend that has existed throughout Michael Cohen's forty-five year career: the creation of music for both the concert hall and the theater. In addition, as the head of music at Grey Advertising for 30 years, Mr. Cohen has won numerous Clio Awards for his accomplishments within this industry.



Michael Cohen

How does a composer of such range develop?

The Beginning of a Career

It turns out that Michael Cohen has been "making music" since he was a toddler in the Bronx creating "pleasant melodies" on a small toy piano while sitting in his high chair. At three, while in the waiting room of the family physician—a music lover with a piano in his office—young Michael reproduced the tune just played on the radio with perfect pitch. When Dr. Imberman discovered who was responsible for this unexpected "concert," he informed Esther and Murray Cohen that their first-born son could very well be a child prodigy and advised them to give him the best musical education possible. And so they did...

Educating a Prodigy

Cohen was enrolled in the Dalcroze School of Music at age five, and also, his parents engaged world-renowned piano teacher, Aube Tzerko who taught Misha Dichter among others. This extra-curricular musical education continued throughout his childhood and adolescence, until he graduated from the High School of Music and Art in New York City.

Michael received a scholarship to Brandeis University where Leonard Bernstein had taught in the early 1950's and which was in the process of developing an outstanding Music Department. While there, he studied composition with Harold Shapero and Irving Fine, and composed a string quartet and two scores for original musical theater productions. In 1959, he graduated cum laude with the

Phyllis and Lee Coffey Award and the Milender Prize in Music in hand.

Making a Living

Michael Cohen began his professional career as the musical director for the touring company of *The Fantasticks*. This was followed by several years directing such performers as Madeline Kahn, Lily Tomlin, Fanny Flag, Ruth Buzzi, Dixie Carter, and Linda Lavin at The Upstairs at the Downstairs, a premiere cabaret venue in New York City. In 1969, he was hired at Grey Advertising as the musical director where he remained for 30 years rising to a position of Senior Vice-President, Director of Music.

Other Accomplishments

During his career in advertising, Mr. Cohen continued composing works for both the concert hall and the theater. He wrote the music for *Rappaccini's Daughter*, an opera based on the Hawthorne short story which was work-shopped at the Eugene O'Neill Center in Waterford, Connecticut, the Minnesota Opera, and the Lake George Opera. *I Remember* premiered at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C in February 1996, and this chamber work has also been performed in Amsterdam, at the prestigious Ravinia Festival in Chicago as well as in St. Louis, Miami, Pittsburgh, and the Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York.

In October, 1996, *I Am Anne Frank* was performed at Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center starring Andrea Marcovicci, for



Trini Alvarado as Anne Frank.

whom it was written, with the American Symphony Orchestra. Sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League, it was also presented in June 2002 at Town Hall in New York City, again with Ms. Marcovicci and the Concordia Orchestra.

Additional projects have included: scoring and arranging Elie Weisel's *A Passover Seder* presented nationally on PBS; commissions for chamber works from the Concert Artists Guild, Serenata, Music Amici, the Manhattan Brass Quintet, and the trio *Windsong*; a song cycle with texts by Edna St. Vincent Millay premiered in July 2002 at the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival in Maine; an anthem for Seeds Of Peace; and a liturgical work commissioned by the Central Synagogue in New York City and Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh.

'Yours, Anne' Continues...

As the only one of several

musical theater treatments of the Anne Frank story authorized by Otto Frank, *Yours, Anne* continues to survive. In 2005, the CD of the original Off-Broadway cast album was released, and it has received a glowing review by theater critic, Chris Curcio who gives it a "Grade A" rating.

According to Curcio, *Yours, Anne* is "a powerful and moving musical treatment of the touching story of survival." The music and performances of a fine cast convey the emotional struggle that the family endured in their attempt to evade the Nazis. The music is melodic and haunting and highlights the familiar story that Frank told of her family's difficult ordeal... This touching musical is a brilliant testament to the power and wonder of the Frank family's challenging circumstances."

In January, 2005, *Yours, Anne* was produced at the Fairview Library Theater in Toronto, and more recently in March 2006, it was performed at The Music Theater of Idaho. A joint production of *I Remember* and *I Am Anne Frank* is scheduled for May, 2006, in Minneapolis co-presented by The Nautilus Music Theater and Intermedia Arts.

As *Yours, Anne* and its offspring continue their performance lives, we can only say: Thank you, Michael Cohen, for the song.

CD's of 'Yours, Anne' and 'I Remember' are available at Amazon.com and most music outlets; 'I Am Anne Frank' can be ordered directly from The Anne Frank Center off of their website at www.annefrank.com.