



ARTISTIC SKETCHES

## *The Maestro Among Us*

Abraham Kaplan spent his life conducting alongside classical musical giants. Today, he lives a quiet life on Mercer Island. **BY TOVA GANNANA**

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**A**BRAM KAPLAN remembers, as a young child in pre-state Israel, singing Bulgarian folk songs with his mother. “You sing the melody now, and I will harmonize,” she would say.

Kaplan believes the musical compositions he has produced were borne from her instructions. Yet he credits his father with beginning his career. “And because I am the son of my father, I established a chorus,” he says. “I believe that my father, Shlomo Kaplan, was the best choral conductor that I’ve ever known. He intuitively knew what was necessary to make a chorus sound spectacular.”

Born in 1931 to Shlomo and Sarah Kaplan — immigrants to pre-state Israel from Russia and Bulgaria, respectively — Kaplan first organized a choir on Kibbutz Rosh HaNikra, harmonizing in his head before arranging the singers, just as his mother had harmonized with him.

The day I speak with Maestro Kaplan in his home on Mercer Island is a bright April one, alight with sun and wind. To be in a room with him is to be in the presence of a man who has spent his whole life immersed in composing, conducting, and being in love with music. Kaplan has lived in Washington since 1977, when he took over as the director of choral music at the University of Washington. A substantial number of Seattle’s community chorus conductors studied under him. Yet despite his influence on this country’s music scene for half a century, Abraham Kaplan’s legacy is largely unknown outside the classical world.

**K**APLAN’S FATHER, Shlomo, a Zionist who arrived in 1927 at the age of 17, began by building roads and working in the orange groves of Ness Ziona. But because he too was the son of his father, a talented cantor in the Old Country,





**TOP LEFT:** Conducting at the New York Philharmonic  
**TOP RIGHT:** Working with Leonard Bernstein  
**BOTTOM LEFT:** With Richard and Pat Nixon at a White House State Dinner  
**BOTTOM RIGHT:** With Igor Stravinsky at the Stravinsky Festival for the New York Philharmonic, circa 1965

Haaretz headline, “Prominent Jewish Composer, Ernest Bloch is dead.” Bloch, in 1933, had completed *Avodath Hakodesh*, the first choral-orchestral liturgical service for Jewish worship, which both Kaplan and his father had conducted. “It was as if something hit me over the head, telling me how stupid a person I was for not having gone to meet him while he was alive,” Kaplan writes in *Splendid Encounters*. “That was when I thought, since music is so important to me — and since the great composers are the ones that supply me with the music that I am going to spend my *life* with — I will never let that happen again.”

Like his father and mother before him, Kaplan became an immigrant, and in his new country, America, he became a prolific choral conductor, one who would work with such maestros as Igor Stravinsky, Leopold Stokowski, and Leonard Bernstein, among many other greats of the 20th-century classical music world. Bernstein said that Abraham Kaplan was “a heaven-sent maestro.”

Kaplan accepted the position of director of choral music at Juilliard, a position he held from 1961 until coming to UW in 1977. “I was a fledgling conductor in my early 20s, unsure of myself and pretty scared,” says Dr. Linda Gingrich, one of Kaplan’s first students at the University of Washington, and the founder, conductor, and artistic director of Master Chorus Eastside. “And when this imposing man with a shock of black hair walked into the classroom, it was as if the 20th-century musical history entered with him. I was petrified! But watching his hands as he conducted was magical, and slowly I began to learn to be a conductor.”

Dr. Gary Cannon, a former student and now his prin-

and because there was such a strong desire among the early pioneers for music, Shlomo left the roads and the orange groves to form and conduct choruses. “Through his work and travels, he began what became a choral movement in Israel, where every kibbutz, town, and city had its own chorus,” Kaplan writes in his memoir, *Splendid Encounters* (2009). “The people were nourished by this great music. Instruments were less accessible in a developing country, but choruses could be formed anywhere and didn’t require professional training.”

Shlomo Kaplan brought his parents and siblings to Eretz Yisrael, thus saving them from the fate of Jews in Europe during World War II. “My Ashkenazi grandfather, Gershon Kaplan, was a wonderful cantor,” Kaplan says. “The first cantor that I heard that had a glorious baritone.” These early experiences of imaginative musical play with his mother and singing soprano in his father’s

chorus in the Great Synagogue in Petah Tikva, and later as an alto in the Beit HaKnesset HaGadol in Tel Aviv, would weave themselves into Kaplan’s compositions, such as *Glorious* (1974), *Arvit L’Shabbat* (1977), *Psalms of Abraham* (1979), *The Crystal Cathedral Psalms* (1980) and *The K’dusha Symphony* (1981) — pieces that he created after he settled in the United States.

**I**N 1954, WHEN KAPLAN was working at the state-run Kol Yisrael radio station, he decided to leave Israel for America to study music. “I had a feeling that I didn’t know enough,” he says. Awarded a scholarship, he began at the Aspen Music School, and then went for advanced studies at Juilliard. He also attended the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood as both a choral and an orchestral conductor. After graduating from Juilliard in 1957, Kaplan returned to live in Israel.

The catalyst for his return to America was the July 16, 1959,

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principal editor and the artistic director of three Washington state choruses, says of Kaplan, “He lives his life with such humility, charm, and care for those around him. It’s always a pleasure to be with him as a friend and a musician.” Cannon and Gingrich are among many conductors who keep his music alive in the Seattle area and beyond. Acknowledging that Kaplan’s music isn’t as broadly performed as that by some others of his generation, Cannon suggests that “Abe has never tried to be trendy or to compose with any goal in mind other than pure beauty. Popularity is fleeting, but Abe’s

simple, beautiful art will remain forever.”

“When I think of Abraham Kaplan’s music, what always stands out to me is its ‘singability,’” says Jacob Finkle, music director of the Seattle Jewish Chorale, who recently conducted Kaplan’s eight-song set, *Eight Days of Hanukkah*. “Though Kaplan’s musical lines are often accented with exciting rhythmic devices, they always are written in such a way as to fit well for the human voice.”

**K**APLAN’S LIFE in music took him back to Israel several times, including to Tel Aviv

in 1963 to conduct the choruses at the world premiere of Bernstein’s Symphony No. 3, better known as *Kaddish*, alongside Bernstein and narrator Hanna Rovina. Kaplan faced many difficulties in Israel dealing with preparations for the premiere, including bureaucracy, a sense of skepticism that tickets would sell well for this new composition, and a chorus that was not up to the standard Bernstein was used to working with at the New York Philharmonic. However, all nine performances sold out. “Music lovers” came to hear the concert, Kaplan says. “Bernstein was so absolutely commanding in his presence and passion for the music that every concert was magical, and the delighted crowds offered long, standing ovations.” Thinking about Bernstein, Kaplan says, “I appreciate him as a genius. Maybe the one genius I met in my lifetime.” Kaplan remembers passionately discussing with Bernstein the ending of *Kaddish*. “In some way I contributed to the *Kaddish* symphony,” Kaplan says. “I was too young to understand it at the time. I was just arguing like an Israeli with chutzpah.”

Bernstein’s argument, according to Kaplan was, “A huge symphony like this should not end in a whisper.” Kaplan countered, “If they are profound pieces, like Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, they cannot end with a bang.”

Dr. James Savage, who for over 30 years directed the music program at St. James Cathedral in Seattle, was one of Kaplan’s students at UW. “With quiet strength, he taught us effective techniques and demonstrated with his conducting his world-class understanding of the structure and meaning of musical masterpieces,” he says. “In sometimes deceptively simple strokes, he is able to bring richness and subtle meaning to familiar melodies and texts; in

completely new works, he can startle with his freshness and delight with inevitable development to unexpected places.”

**I**N HIS 1985 TEXTBOOK, *Choral Conducting*, Kaplan writes, “Of all the answers given to the question ‘What is music?’, the one that seems to me to be the most illuminating is ‘Music is a language!’” He goes on to write, “Music’s realm of communication is much more abstract and touches us in ways that cannot be described by words. We could say that music starts where words end.”

In Hebrew, the word for faith or conviction is “emunah.” This is also the root of the word artist, “oman,” one who has faith in their branches and faith in their roots. Kaplan’s latest composition, called *Wisdom of the Ages*, is a collection of canons in the range of one octave and one note common at the center of all human voices that comprises adaptations of pithy sayings, such as Franklin Roosevelt’s “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Kaplan composed *Wisdom of the Ages* thinking that a good way to end choral warm-ups is to sing something the chorus knows well. “And then,” he says, “the harmony helps them stay in tune.”

Outside, the blustery spring day is closing in pinks and yellows. I imagine we are in Tel Aviv on Rachov Mazeh, in the country where he first sang.

“My final ambition as a composer is one that Brahms expressed,” Kaplan says. “Brahms was walking with a friend on the banks of the Danube and saw a young couple strolling along, and the man was whistling a tune by Schubert. Brahms said, ‘This is what I hope my music will become: anonymous.’ I would like my music to become the traditional.” ●