

Ben Steinberg Was My Own Sacred Bridge



Picture of Passover Haggadah, Israeli Museum, courtesy of the author

by Geoffrey Clarfield

Canadian Jewish composer and friend of Israel Ben Steinberg has passed away. I wanted him to live to be a hundred, even more. But that was not to be. He had so much more to offer as he lived a rich life, not in money and not only in sound but in sound relationships.

He once told me, musician to musician, "Geoffrey, you are not the kind of musician who should lock himself away in a small studio room and practice for eight hours a day. You will want to get out, meet and work with other musicians, perhaps even dabble in musicology."

He was right. I can sing and play solo, if necessary, but I

prefer ensembles, field recordings, research, writing and even film making. Ben was right. Not just once, but many times over.

He was savvy, a well-trained musician, a gifted composer but he knew that trying to be a serious musician in post war Canada was the route to starvation and so he became a high school music teacher and we were the lucky ones. He had a salary, a nice house, a pension and summer holidays to pursue his music.

He tolerated my experiment, to play a different instrument for each year of high school, going from clarinet in Grade 8, cello in Grade 9 and when I met him in Grade 10, to alto sax, tenor sax, (with some private lessons from Paul Brody down the road) and not to mention flute and piccolo.

I remember clearly playing a jazz-like melody in high school band while he was conducting. Having little self-restraint I started improvising. He lost his temper, yelled at me and said, "Mr. Clarfield, this is a piece of written music, not a jam session!" Meaning there was time for jam sessions, but not now. Lesson well taken – to everything there is a time and a season.

During one year he invited me to present to class what I was listening to. The answer was Afghan folk music field recordings. I brought them to class and gave a one hour lecture on the music and the culture of musicians in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly I studied ethnomusicology as an undergrad and learnt to play the Turkish long necked and short necked lutes. It was my first academic lecture. I was 17.

Above all Ben introduced me to the work of Eric Werner, a world expert in the music of Felix Mendelssohn, a multilingual European Jewish musicologist, Holocaust refugee whose study the *Sacred Bridge* argued that Gregorian Chant is the musical descendant of the music of the first century synagogue. In

that sense, Werner bridged the music of my ancestors with the European classical music that I studied at the Royal Conservatory. But Ben was my own “sacred bridge.”

I will miss him as will so many, many other students who were touched by his brilliance and creativity.

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