



Through Music

A Composition and a Sound Installation by

Shahrokh Yadegari

PERFORMERS:

Siamak Shajarian: Vocals

Kate St. Pierre: Vocals

Keyavash Nourai: Violin

Dimitri Mahlis: Oud

Satnam Ramgotra: Tabla, Percussion



Photo: Robert Adler

Shahrokh Yadegari is a composer and the head of the MFA program in sound design at the Theatre and Dance Department of University of California, San Diego. He has studied both traditional Persian music as well as contemporary electronic music and has performed and lectured internationally. Among his recent projects are the conception and direction of the multimedia music/dance animation project, *Only Sound Remains*, and the sound design for *The Children of Herakles* by Peter Sellars.

Siamak Shajarian, vocalist, is considered to be the most accomplished Persian traditional singer living in the United States. He has performed with such masters as Jalil Shanaz, Faramarz Payvar, and Mohammad Ali Kiani-nejad. **Kate St. Pierre**, vocalist, studied opera, North Indian and Balkan voice as well as Tuvan and Tibetan throat chanting. She has recorded works for multiple film scores and soundtracks. **Keyavash Nourai**, violinist, studied with Indian and Western classical masters including L. Subramaniam and Eugene Fodor. He plays and teaches numerous Persian instruments and has composed many symphonic pieces and chamber music for orchestra. **Dimitri Mahlis**, oudist, guitarist, and multi-instrumentalist; he is a musician of depth and versatility. Dimitri is well versed in the musical philosophy of both Eastern and Western traditions and has had a fruitful career as a musician and composer. **Satnam Ramgotra**, a multi-instrumentalist, has studied with the tabla maestro Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri. He has performed with such renowned musicians as Ustad Salamat Ali Khan, Beck, String, and Nikka Costa.

Lawrence R. Rinder is Dean of the College at the California College of the Arts (CCA), which is celebrating its centennial year in 2007. Rinder was the Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Curator of Contemporary Art at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, where he was chief curator of the 2002 Whitney Biennial. Rinder was founding director of the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, and he held a variety of positions at the Berkeley Art Museum, including curator of the MATRIX program.



Photograph by Leonard Nimoy courtesy of R. Michelson Galleries (www.RMichelson.com)

Image inside right: *Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's Dreams*, 19th century, ink and tempera on paper, Iran, Gift of Chimon Mayeri and Family

REVISIONS IS A SERIES OF EXHIBITIONS AT THE MAGNES IN WHICH ARTISTS, CURATORS, AND SCHOLARS ARE INVITED TO CREATE EXPERIMENTAL INSTALLATIONS INSPIRED BY THE MUSEUM'S PERMANENT COLLECTION. THE REVISIONS SERIES WAS LAUNCHED AT THE MAGNES WITH THANKS TO INITIAL FUNDING FROM THE FLEISCHACKER FOUNDATION.

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JUDAH L. MAGNES MUSEUM

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Alla Efimova, Chief Curator

Rummaging through old family belongings, discovering secrets about your grandparents, coming into possession of their history, and connecting with it—these are all very poignant and universal experiences. Why could a museum not be the place where such encounters happen; where an object, a document, a photograph helps to bridge the gap between generations; where personal narratives and communal histories meet?

In 2005 I asked Lawrence Rinder, an internationally recognized contemporary art curator and a Dean of California College of Art, to rummage through his grandfather's archive, preserved at the Magnes. Lawrence neither knew of Cantor Reuben Rinder's (1887–1966) archive, nor had he ever met his famous grandfather. Yet, three archival boxes filled with correspondence, program notes, and musical scores became the site of encounter between the two men—a grandfather and a grandson. Then archival project unexpectedly metamorphosed into a digital sound installation that brought together artists, curators, scholars, and musicians of diverse backgrounds to pay tribute to a beloved and broad-minded leader of the Jewish community in San Francisco.



Cantor Reuben Rinder Reciting a Blessing at Congregation Emanu-El, unknown date, gelatin-silver print, Western Jewish History Center

Lawrence Rinder, Guest Curator

I was invited by the Judah L. Magnes Museum to develop an exhibition based on my grandfather's papers kept in their archive. Reuben R. Rinder (1887–1966) was the Cantor of San Francisco's Temple Emanu-El from 1915 until 1959. He dedicated his life to Jewish liturgical music and, through a number of important commissions, brought renewed life to it. Among those who composed new music for the temple under his direction were Ernest Bloch, Darius Milhaud, Frederick Jacobi, Paul Ben Haim and Marc Lavry. My grandfather hoped to inspire a new Jewish musical tradition that would be comparable to the great history of Christian liturgical composition; however, he believed that music invested with spirit, of whatever tradition, was appropriate for use in the temple and regularly programmed music by Bach, Haydn, and Handel. Indeed, besides music, my grandfather's greatest passion was ecumenicalism: he worked for decades to bring about greater inter-faith understanding and harmony.

I found many fascinating documents in my grandfather's archive, but rather than simply exhibiting these I decided to extend my grandfather's work into the present by commissioning a new musical composition. The text I selected for this composition is an ancient Jewish prayer, the Priestly Benediction (in Hebrew, *birkat kohanim*, beginning with the word "Yevarekhekha"), which I found in the archive along with some documents for the 1955 Festival of Faith, celebrating the 10th anniversary of the United Nations. At this event, attended by 16,000 people in San Francisco's Cow Palace, my grandfather presented his own arrangement of a traditional Ashkenazi melody accompanying the prayer. The Priestly Benediction reads as follows:

May the Lord bless you and keep you

*May the Lord cause his face to shine
upon you and be gracious unto you*

*May the Lord lift up his countenance
upon you and give you peace.*

I was drawn to this prayer because I remember it being recited at Temple Emanu-El and because it exemplifies, for me, the nurturing spirit of warmth and generosity that infused the liberal humanism of this especially progressive congregation. In the course of developing this exhibition, I learned more about the Priestly Benediction; for example, that it is traditionally recited on Shabbat by the father who places his hands over his children's heads as he speaks, and on Yom Kippur by the *kohanim* (priests) who stand beneath a ceremonial cloth with their hands raised in the distinctive split-fingered gesture popularized by Leonard Nimoy in his role as Commander Spock on the TV show Star Trek. The Priestly Benediction is one of the oldest known Jewish prayers.

In thinking about a composer to commission for this work, I hoped to find someone who would be able to combine a reverence for this ancient text with an innovative, contemporary musical approach. After researching a number of options, I decided to work with Shahrokh Yadegari, a composer who has studied classical as well as electronic and computer music. Of Iranian-Jewish background, Yadegari's focus for many years has been Persian traditional music and its contemporary interpretations. While his own work has extended into experimental musical forms, including computer-generated compositions, he has also collaborated with some of America's most accomplished traditional Persian musicians. Yadegari agreed to develop a composition and sound installation for the Magnes exhibition that would include the Priestly

Benediction sung in English and Hebrew combining elements of traditional Persian music with Ashkenazi influences as well as modern digital expressive idioms. He also suggested the inclusion of fragments of two poems by Mawlānā Jalāl-ad-Dīn (Rumi), to be sung in Persian.

Once the composer had been selected, I selected two works from the museum's collection for display. One is a large late 19th-century brass basin inscribed on the bottom with an image of two hands splayed in the gesture of the Priestly Benediction. The bowl, which came from Russia, was used in the synagogue to wash the hands of the *kohanim* before they blessed the congregation during Yom Kippur services. The second object is a 19th-century Judeo-Persian miniature representing Joseph interpreting the Pharaoh's dream. A remarkable instance of cooperation and collaboration between a Jew and non-Jew in the Old Testament, the story of Joseph and Pharaoh appears in the Koran as well and is one of the most popular and widely illustrated Biblical narratives in traditional Middle Eastern Jewish cultures. I was drawn to this image both for the artist's inventive solution to representing the Pharaoh's dream and for its symbolism, encapsulating as it does my grandfather's ecumenicalism as well as the fact that Jews and Muslims are joining together to create this very exhibition. Finally, I have included in the exhibition an evocative photograph of hands in the sign of the benediction by Leonard Nimoy.

I am grateful for the opportunity given to me by the Judah L. Magnes Museum to explore my grandfather's archive and to extend his legacy of inspiring a new generation of contemporary Jewish liturgical music. It is also my hope that this collaboration and exhibition will help, in however small a way, to bring more closely together the people of America, Israel, and Iran. May the Lord give us peace.

Shahrokh Yadegari, Composer

In most cultures of the world music has a spiritual value.

Even for materialists those who do not believe in a metaphysical world—music still has a magical quality. This magic comes from music's ability to communicate an intangible idea, while sensually affecting us with the sound itself. When this happens, we call it creativity or creation—something new has come into being.

In the religious sense, creation is an act of God. As the poet Kahlil Gibran says, "When you love, you should not say 'God is in my heart' but rather 'I am in the heart of God.'" One interpretation is that we create God with our actions, while having faith in the unifying spirit of a God separate from ourselves. In Kabbalistic traditions, some believe that God is not a noun but a verb. Similarly, in Persian Sufism, it is understood that the act of love is the path to God. The words of Rumi, one of the most famous poets of the world, are perhaps the most passionate example of such an approach to God, one which is compassionate, inclusive, and liberating.

For this composition, I chose two poems by Rumi which emphasize the value of oneness of humanity over the religious/political/racial/geographical divide between humans, the act of love, and the state of freedom reached through honest passion, as the highest forms of worship. These qualities are representative of the musical approach of Cantor Rinder, who spoke of music as worship.

Through Music has been designed to allow multiple voices and sensitivities to share a common space. Western musicology defines harmony as a strict and distinct combination of tones. In this composition, the concept of harmony is approached through its philosophical meaning as

the harmonious relationship between the various parts of a whole. Musically-speaking the harmony is found not only in the instantaneous combination of sounds, but also in the more fluid interaction between musical phrases and elements. In this work, a composition of Cantor Rinder in minor mode based on the Priestly Benediction will be heard alongside the Persian/Eastern melodies and motifs. The *dastgahs* Esfahan and Mahur, which are similar to the major and minor modes in Western music, are used as Persian/Eastern musical structures.

The composition is designed to work in a non-linear way. The whole is broken into a collection of parts, and the computer is used to mix and project different parts of the work in various configurations. Various sonic layers are prepared to melt in or harmoniously oppose each other. The four distinct layers of the work are synthesized electronics, solo voice and solo instrumentals, ensemble sections, and rhythmical sections. By spatializing the sound and moving the various sections of the music spatially, one can attempt to change the physical experience of being within a museum; thus at times, the transformed space itself becomes the composition.

Listening is a musical and compassionate act. Let us listen to each other and make sure that the name of God does not separate us. Faith brings us that responsibility. Similar to the work of Cantor Rinder, this composition hopes to suggest a message of harmony through music.

