including a version of "The House I Live In" different from Frank Sinatra's

The Abel Meeropol Centennial Concert

with The Metropolitan Philharmonic Chorus

conducted by Leonard Lehrman
Abel Meeropol (Feb. 14, 1903-Oct. 29, 1986) was a Jewish writer, composer, and New York City public school English teacher, whose best known work, made famous by Billie Holiday, is the anti-lynching song titled "Strange Fruit," for which he wrote both the words and the music under the pen name of Lewis Allan. He deplored injustice in any form, and in his writings decried racial intolerance, class discrimination, anti-Semitism, and political witch hunts. He and his wife Anne adopted the orphaned sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been executed in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage for the Soviet Union.

His plays, librettos, songs, and poetry reveal a strong social conscience and a desire to improve society. He was a tireless commentator who followed closely the major issues and events of his time, from the Depression and Jim Crow laws up through Watergate and the possibility of nuclear annihilation. His papers are in Special Collections of Boston University's Mugar Library. They have inspired Nancy Kovaleff Baker's article on him in the journal American Music; David Margolick's book, Strange Fruit; Joel Katz's film of the same name; and this concert, which was presented at Great Neck House Feb. 9 and at Queens College Feb. 23, 2003, sponsored by the Professor Edgar H. Lehrman Memorial Foundation, the Elie Siegmeister Society, Great Neck House, Meet The Composer, Nassau Grants for the Arts, the Aaron Copland School of Music, and Friends of the Queens College Library.

The poem "Conscience" was published in the 1969 collection of 125 poems, The Eye of the Storm - and light verse for heavy hearts by Lewis Allan (Abel Meeropol). Copies of that volume were made available at the December 1986 Abel Meeropol memorial meeting in Ardsley, NY. Leonard Lehrman (b. 1949), who received a copy there, was so moved by it that he set it to music for soprano Helene Williams, who performed it widely, premiering it June 19, 1987 at the annual meeting of the National Committee to Re-Open the Rosenberg Case, at the NYU Law School Auditorium, and recording it on the 1991 cassette Songs of Conscience. In the composer's arrangement for chorus, it was performed by the Ithaca Community Chorus and the Nassau Community College Chorus. In his 2002 arrangement for chorus and orchestra, it won the first Sunrise/Sunset Composition Contest of the Brookhaven Arts Council, and was premiered by a chorus of 160 and an orchestra of 55 conducted by Martin Rutishauser July 13, 2002.

"These Are the Times," based on words from Thomas Paine's Common Sense, was set to music by Herbert Haufrecht (1909-1998) and published by Edwin H. Morris in 1951, at the height of the McCarthy witchhunt period.

"The House I Live In" was set to music by Earl Robinson (1910-1991) and published by Chappell in 1942. One of America's great patriotic songs, sung by Frank Sinatra in the movie of the same name, it had many verses, some of which were censored out by the film-makers. Helene Williams sings a version based on sketches found in the archives and written up in American Music by Nancy Kovaleff Baker, together with an ending that Earl Robinson himself sang at the People's Voice Cafe on January 25, 1989, and which Helene Williams sang at a November 4, 1991 Village Gate program in his memory.

"John Reed" (Sept. 25, 1945) was one of six "American Legends" with music by Elie Siegmeister (1909-1991) which were published, and recorded by him leading the Almanac Singers. The solo version was never performed, until Helene and Leonard premiered it at the October 1987 John Reed Centennial, presided over by Corliss Lamont, at Harvard's Adams House, and at the Harvard Club of New York.

"The Wind" (May 12, 1948) was discovered in the Library of Congress and premiered April 30, 1997 at Borough Hall in Brooklyn. The other four Siegmeister songs, all world premieres, were all written in Brooklyn, and were discovered in the Abel Meeropol archives at Boston University in July, 2002: "Autumn in My Heart" (Apr. 26, 1952), "The Lollypop" (May 14, 1948; dedicated to the composer's younger daughter Nancy), "The Snowman" (May 8, 1949; dedicated to the composer's elder daughter Mimi), and "The Moon" (May 13, 1948, also to Nancy). The duet arrangement of the latter is by Leonard Lehrman.

The a cappella duet, by Leonard Lehrman, "Eve," is based on two different, undated versions, of a poem found in the Boston University archives. It is followed by one of Meeropol's most popular songs, recorded by Peggy Lee and the Smothers Brothers, among others: "Apples, Peaches and Cherries." The arrangement for tenor, soprano and chorus is by Leonard Lehrman. The ukelele chords are in the 1952 sheet music published by Broude.
There are several copies of a lead sheet and a tape recording of a unison chorus singing Meeropol’s “Hey, Mr. Cockroach” (1972) in the Boston University archives. The arrangement for solo quartet and piano is by Leonard Lehrman.

The poems for Leonard Lehrman's “Two Rounds” were also found at the B.U. archives. (The first one, “The Purple Couch,” the composer has dedicated to his father, psychiatrist Dr. Nathaniel S. Lehrman. The second one comments aptly on journalism today.) Likewise the poems “Sonnet: To Anne,” one of several poems Abel wrote for his wife, and “Renunciation” (1926). The Lehrman Foundation commissioned a setting of the latter from Prof. Joel Mandelbaum (b. 1932), former Chair of the Aaron Copland School of Music and Professor Emeritus at Queens College.

“Inventory” (1942) was Meeropol’s only collaboration with Kurt Weill (1900-1950), who later recommended him for a Guggenheim Fellowship. A number of different versions of the piece may be found in manuscript and on a recording (by a voice that sounds very much like Nelson Eddy) at the Kurt Weill Foundation. The version for this concert was transcribed by Lehrman and premiered at the 2000 meeting at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue of the National Committee to Re-Open the Rosenberg Case.

The Soldier was the last of four operas by Lehman Engel (1910-1982), two of them on libretti by Lewis Allan. (The other was the 1954 Malady of Love.) It was premiered in concert at Carnegie Hall with a cast that included John Reardon and Brenda Lewis, Nov. 25, 1956, and published by Chappell that year. The plot concerns a shell-shocked soldier, back from the war, unable to overcome the horrors of his memories, and slowly driven into madness.

“Silence” is the Act II finale of the 1977 opera by Martin Kalmanoff (b. 1920) Insect Comedy, after the 1923 play Insect Life by Karel and Josef Capek. The Center for Contemporary Opera premiered it May 20, 1993 at Hunter College.

“Who Will Go to the War When It Comes?” is the climactic solo number for the title character in one of the best American operas ever written, The Good Soldier Schweik, after the classic Czech novel by Jaroslav Hasek. The magnum opus of composer Robert Kurka (1921-1957), it was premiered at N.Y. City Opera a year after the composer's death from leukemia.

Darlin' Corie, based on an Ozark folk legend, was Meeropol's first libretto (of six) and Siegmeister's first opera (of nine). Premiered Feb. 18, 1954 at Hofstra, it was published by Chappell. They began work on a second opera, based on Chekhov's play Medved' (variously translated as The Brute, The Boor, or, literally, The Bear). The libretto went through eight drafts. One aria and one duet were nearly completed. But then Elie and Abel “parted company,” and efforts at reconciliation did not succeed until Abel was no longer able to write coherently because of Alzheimer’s. For this concert, Leonard Lehrman has gone back to the original first draft of the libretto, entitled The Wooing, and set every word of it. There are at least 8 other operas in English based on this play, 4 in German, and an untold number in Russian, but this one is located in Boston in 1910. Any musical similarities to passages in Peter and the Wolf, Lehrman’s Reineke Fuchs, or Marc Blitzstein's “Mystery of the Flesh” are “purely coincidental.”

The ecology song, “Lost Forever,” bears a copyright date of 1969 by Lewis Allan. Like “Hey, Mr. Cockroach,” there are numerous copies of a leadsheet and tape recordings of it in the archives, except in this case it is Abel Meeropol who sings it, a cappella, over and over, a little differently each time. The melody has been harmonized and arranged for chorus by Leonard Lehrman.

The Metropolitan Philharmonic Chorus was founded by Leonard Lehrman in 1988. Comprised of members from Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Nassau, it performs works of social consciousness throughout the metropolitan area. Highlights have included the Manhattan premiere of Elie Siegmeister’s I Have A Dream with William Warfield at Harlem School of the Arts and on WQXR; Lehrman’s The Universal Declaration of Human Rights at the United Nations; A Requiem for Hiroshima; and Rosenberg Cantata: We Are Innocent, recorded on LP by Opus One with the Metropolitan Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the composer.

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PERFORMERS

HELENE WILLIAMS, soprano, co-founded The Bronx Opera and has performed in all genres across the U.S., Europe, Latin America, and Australia. Her recordings with Leonard Lehrman include the cassette Songs of Conscience, the Opus One LP We Are Innocent (Lehrman's Rosenberg Cantata); A Marc Blitzstein Songbook (Original Cast Recordings 4441 with Gregory Mercer and James Sergi); A [Marc] Blitzstein Cabaret and Broadway Dreams (both on Premier); The William Cutler Bryant Bicentennial Concert, Songs of Love, and More Songs of Love (all on Capstone).

TARA VENDITTI, mezzo-soprano, studied in Salzburg and earned degrees from Oberlin and Manhattan School of Music. She has been a soloist with the New York City Opera, Center for Contemporary Opera, Opera Memphis, and on Vox. In 2001 she created the roles of the Clerk, Mary Splaine, and President Stratton in the Blitzstein/Lehrman Sacco and Vanzetti.

GREGORY MERCER, tenor, has been hailed on four continents for the sweetness and agility of his voice, his musicality, and his acting. He sang Sacco in the August 2001 world premiere of the Blitzstein/Lehrman Sacco and Vanzetti at The White Barn Theatre in Westport, CT. His recordings include Virgil Thomson's Lord Byron (Koch), William Mayer songs (Albany), and Blitzstein songs (Original Cast). He has sung Schnittke in Amsterdam, Lowell Liebermann in Monte Carlo, Puccini in Caracas, Joel Feigin with Parnassus, Jack Gottlieb with Downtown Music, at the Met and New York City Opera. With the Prague Opera he toured Japan.

GREGORY RAHMING, baritone, was a finalist in the Luciano Pavarotti Competition and won the Leontyne Price Vocal Arts Competition, the Opera Index Competition, and the Young Patronesses Award of Miami. Composer Hans Werner Henze chose him to create one of the principal roles in his opera El Cimarron for the Munich Biennale, and called his portrayal “a tour-de-force.” Other highlights of his career have included On the Town on Broadway, the N.Y. Festival of Song, New York City Opera, the Lincoln Center Institute, Banff and Expo 2000 in Hannover. With Leonard Lehrman he sang Siegmeister's settings of Langston Hughes in centennial concerts in 2002.

LEONARD LEHRMAN is the composer of 10 operas, 6 musicals, 4 cantatas, and 138 other works that have been heard throughout North America, Europe, Australia, Israel, Russia, and at the U.N. and have won numerous awards. His performances and compositions have been recorded on Opus One, Premier, Capstone, and Original Cast Recordings. Dr. Lehrman received his B.A. from Harvard and his D.M.A. from Cornell. Formerly Assistant Professor of Music at SUNY-Geneseo and Assistant Conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, he is Archivist Emeritus of The Long Island Composers Alliance, Laureate Conductor of the Jewish Music Theater of Berlin, Minister of Music at Christ Church Babylon, Director of the Oceanside Chorale, Co-Founder with Helene Williams of the Elie Siegmeister Society, and Editor of The Marc Blitzstein Songbook published by Boosey & Hawkes.

The Metropolitan Philharmonic Chorus

soprano Helene Williams#, Dorothy Brecher, Ellen Davidson*, Daphne DeRoo, Susan Sokol*, Nancy Zucker*
alto Tara Venditti#, Barbara Barnes*, Mara Goodman*
tenor Gregory Mercer#, Bill Castleman, Gene Glickman
baritone Joshua Minkin*, Ben Spierman*
bass Gregory Rahming#, Nathaniel S. Lehrman*

#section leader *founding member ◇assistant conductor

CAST of The Wooing (in order of appearance)

Prologue/Stage Manager: Gregory Mercer
George Smith: Gregory Rahming
Mrs. Helen Potter, widow: Helene Williams
Hester, her maid: Tara Venditti
Time: 1910
Place: Boston

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