

FOR WOMEN ONLY! Interview with Female Composers!

The Jewish music industry is enjoying a surge of female artists on the scene. The Shira Girls Choir, Shevach, The London Girls Choir, Kineret, Chanale, Suffy, and Ayelet Hashachar and the list still goes on . . . a mere five years ago, Jewish women and girls did not possess even an iota of the abundant choices from which it is now possible to select. With such an ornate display of female musical talents available now, you can truly listen all day!

By: Esther Schechter

I interviewed Mrs. Chaya Bruria Sachs, the director and composer of **The Shira Girls Choir**:



What compelled you to create The Shira Girls Choir?

I started the choir for a few reasons. Firstly, I love music! I started playing piano at age 5, and composed my first song at age 6 (it wasn't very good but it was still a song!) When I was little, I was always singing in plays and concerts, and always wished I could sing on a CD. Also, there are so many opportunities for boys who sing to shine. They can sing z'miros, lain at their bar mitzvahs, and sing out loud in shul. But aside from school and camp productions, when can a girl who sings truly shine? Many of the mothers, whose daughters have sung in my choir, have told me that their daughters became so much more confident, and that their grades in school actually improved after singing with the choir because it raised their self esteem. They were using their talents to do something very special.

Another reason I did this is because I had so many songs that I had composed. Most of them had been sung in Bais Yaakov productions but I wanted to spread them to all of Klal Yisroel. If I wanted them presented the way I wanted them to be, the only way to do it was to direct the choir myself, so they would be sung the way I wanted.

When I started the choir in 1995, there were no women's CDs on the same professional caliber as the men's CDs. Although they had beautiful vocal arrangements, they were very amateur and not widely distributed. When I would ask women why they didn't buy more women's music they would tell me that women's music just wasn't professional. There was no reason people had to consider women's music a joke! I decided that I was going to produce a women's CD that would be just as professional as the men's in that it would have similar musical arrangements and sound quality. Many people were skeptical. I was told that because there was a limited audience for women's music, it wasn't worth investing the amount of money needed to produce such a professional production. True, we don't have the same audience as the men, but I figured that if each household bought one men's CD for the entire household to listen to, then there was no reason that same household wouldn't buy one women's CD for the girls- if it was just as professional as the men's. Boruch Hashem, when I released my first CD in 1998, it hit the women's world by storm. We sold thousands of CD's and it is

still selling well today, proving that if done right, there is no reason women's music couldn't make it.

Two CD's are quite an achievement! Are you working on a third?

A third Shira Girls Choir album is being planned but don't expect it soon, it took seven years until the second one came out! My family comes first. However, it's important for women to have an outlet besides the family. Boruch Hashem, my husband is very supportive of what I do and he is very involved in it, although he has never heard it! So many women never use the talents Hashem has bestowed upon them because they just can't find the time. But we need to make the time to use our talents. Hashem wants us to use them to bring simcha to others and to do acts of chesed with them.

Right after the first CD was released, women started asking for a second one- but one thing I don't do is release a CD every year just to keep up with everyone else. I don't include "filler" songs just to get the CD out. I only release a CD when I feel I have ten excellent songs. I spend a lot of time on each song so that it will be special. Also, it is much harder for women to release CDs every other year because we are the akeres habayis and our first priority is our home.

The music business is a tough business and it is extremely time consuming. Since I work with kids, all rehearsals, recordings, and shows must take place during non-school hours, and obviously that is just when my family is home. When I am working on a CD, I am out of the house a lot and therefore, I do not produce one that often.

Where do you get your inspiration from?

So many women have written me letters telling me that they tackle their Erev Shabbos cleaning and cooking b'simcha because they complete their tasks while listening to my CD. It's so much easier for them to prepare for shabbos while listening to women singing. This is just one example of how it's brought simcha to women. It gives me so much

chizuk to keep doing this. It's not the reason I started the choir- because at that time I didn't realize how it would impact people- but it's a big part of why I continue.

Do you plan on doing any concerts in the near future?

The choir performs at low cost for fundraisers so that the organization can raise as much money as possible. Many women's organizations such as bikur cholim organizations want to have fundraisers geared toward women. We are planning a tour with the choir. Although in the past, many solo singers have toured the country, there has never been a professionally choreographed girls' choir touring. We really put on quite a show! It helps to raise a lot of tzedakah which makes it all worthwhile.

Can you tell me if any songs are your favorite?

As far as which songs are my favorites, I have to say that each song that I compose is with a particular reason in mind. I do not arbitrarily pull words out of a hat. There is a specific reason why I choose the words I use. Each song is very meaningful to me for different reasons. My tunes truly convey my interpretation of the words, and through my music I try to give women an understanding of what the words mean. Through my English songs, I try to stress the importance of our roles as Jewish mothers. My English songs will always stress a midah that women must utilize in order to fulfill our lofty task as the ones who are responsible for molding the next generation b'derech hatorah. I try to use all different kinds of songs so that there is something that appeals to everyone.

In general, what type of music do you like to listen to?

I am very careful to only listen to Jewish music that has a yidishe taam. There is so much music that is considered "Jewish" music just because the songs

have words from Tehillim or davening. However, we have to be so careful with what we do with words that are so full of kedusha. They aren't just words. We have to make sure that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is proud. When we take these words and set it to goyishe music or music with a goyishe taam, it is an extreme lack of kavod.

I think overall, the women do a better job of presenting songs in a proper way. Many of the men's music just does not have a yiddishe taam, although there are many men's CDs that accomplish this in a proper derech. Just as women are usually the ones who are careful that our homes should be a mikdash miat, so too, we are more careful that our music should display proper kavod hatorah.

What do you think about the surge of female artists on the Jewish music scene?

I think it is wonderful that there is so much music by women now. I really feel that I pioneered a new sound in women's music. All the women's CDs are so different from one another that I don't think we are really competing. So many women tell me that they prefer women's CDs. They derive so much simcha from listening to these CDs. As long as we are bringing simcha into so many women's lives, then the more CDs, the merrier!

(This article originally appeared in Jewish Entertainment Magazine, October 2005)