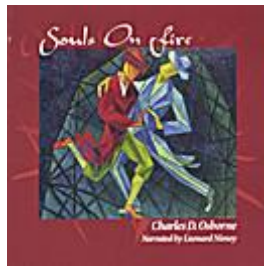


Mp3 Charles D. Osborne - Souls On Fire



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Hailed at its premiere in December 1998 as "stunning, impassioned and beautifully conceived," *Souls On Fire* is a full-length oratorio that tells the story of the founders of European Hassidism. Based on the book by Elie Wiesel, adapted by Aryeh Finklestei 9 MP3 Songs SPOKEN WORD: With Music, CLASSICAL: Orchestral Details: Each musical movement of the work, describes the character in each movement. Charles Osborne has as a composer concentrated on Hassidic music and culture. *Souls On Fire* is the latest in a series of compositions that use Hassidic culture and folklore. As each musical story is told the listener becomes involved with original Hassidic prose, building a foundation of understanding and hopefully a sensation that will strengthen our lives. These Hassidic greats were truly "Souls On Fire". What makes the oratorio "particularly impressive", writes one critic, "is the care with which the composer and librettist have succinctly drawn each portrait, and smoothly made transitions from one master to the next." *Souls On Fire* burns brightly, "with the power of Wiesels insights, and the brilliance of a unique collaboration between composer and librettist." Narrated by world renowned actor and director Leonard Nimoy, this recording also features the Bulgarian National Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, and four outstanding soloists from the Metropolitan and New York City Opera companies From Fanfare Magazine Jan/Feb 2005 *Souls on Fire*, as noted above, is an oratorio based on a libretto by Aryeh Finklestein adapted from Elie Wiesels literary work of the same title. At its core, the message is one of the hope that sustained generations of Jews through persecution and pogrom. That hope, *Souls* tells us, emanated from the spirit of Chassidism and its great leaders, one of whom was the Baal Shem Tov, an 18th-century charismatic figure, many of whose multitude of followers believed him to be the Messiah. The term Chassidism derives from the Hebrew chesed, which translates as mercy, grace, and loving-kindness. Fundamental to Chassidism is the belief that God is love, and that love equals joy. Or, as the text of *Souls*

puts it, That is what Chassidism is: the spark. The movement was, and still is, as it survives today, largely a mystical, visionary celebration of faith that finds certain parallels in contemporary Christian Evangelical movements. It is not without its controversies and detractors among practicing Jews. Historically, its appeal was to the Eastern European Jewish peasantry the poor, the uneducated, the unlearned, the unobservant. Chassidism told them that they neednt be Talmudic scholars in order to come close to God, that God loved all those who were true of heart and who lived good and decent lives. It didnt matter that you couldnt read or interpret scripture for yourself; the rebbe (learned leader and diviner of Gods mysteries and truth) would do that for you. As with all movements, evolution alters original content and appearances, if not necessarily original intent. That intent is still one of inclusion. Chassidic groups today, the world over, reach out to unaffiliated, non-practicing, largely disaffected Jewish youths, inviting them into the fold with singing, hand-clapping, and visions of a joyful future based on love of Torah and devotion to the faith. Knowledge of traditional Judaism is not required; the idea is to learn from the teachings and examples of the rebbe, and in a sense to be born again into a Jewish life. Many are critical of the Chassidic movement. They paint a picture of an anti-intellectual, cult-like mentality that suspends critical judgment, substituting ritual-based beliefs and behaviors for progressive, independent thought. All are accepted and embraced; no sinner is turned away. But at what price? Much of *Souls on Fire* struggles with these conflicts and questions, perhaps best summed up in the line: Elimelekh worked his way through the Talmuds tangled web, while Zusia roamed the woods, and sang and danced for God. The argument is one that theologians of all faiths still debate today; a strict constructionist God who brooks no deviation from His given Word vs. a compassionate God of loving kindness who cares less about strict observance of ritual than about a feeling and caring heart. In the end, there can be no question but that *Souls* comes down on the side of the latter, and that it is a celebration of the Chassidic spirit. Musically, the work is a bit more difficult to deal with. I have consistently called it an oratorio throughout, as has its composer.

Technically speaking, I suppose one could not argue with that label. But I think most of us have a certain set of standard expectations as to what an oratorio is that *Souls* does not seem to fulfill. The truth is that this is a work more heavily reliant on spoken narrative than it is on singing. I have thought long and hard about historical precedents, but I am hard put to come up with any. Assuredly, there are works in which a spoken narrative is set to an instrumental or orchestral score. Richard Strausss little-known *Enoch Arden*, Stravinskys *L'histoire du soldat*, and Coplands *A Lincoln Portrait* come immediately to mind. But in these

examples, singing has no place. The closest model I am able to think of is Arthur Hungers Jeanne dArc au bcher, which is labeled a dramatic oratorio, and does indeed alternate between spoken and sung roles. Yet Souls on Fire is different in that it strikes me that the sung roles interrupt the narration, rather than the other way around. In other words, the vocal contributions by both soloists and chorus, arrestingly beautiful as many of them be, are in the nature of dramatic asides and commentary on the lines that have just been spoken. In this regard, Souls resembles not so much a conventional oratorio as it does a Greek drama in which the chorus, as we understand it, interjected upon the progress of the play to frame the action in a moral context. Thus, in Souls, as just one example, the Storyteller says, Zusia became a Chassid before his younger brother, Elimelekh. Together they were to be the great figures of Galician Chassidism. To which the chorus replies, How good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together. So, what of the music? Well, what there is of it is quite striking. Once you realize that this is not a work of set arias and big number choruses, that the drama is in the spoken narrative, the musical backdrop for that narrative and the sung interpolations by soloists and choir become all the more moving for their poignancy and urgency by the very absence of excess and self-indulgence. A perfectly timed sung contribution at just the right moment underscores and heightens the drama far more effectively than would an hours worth of emotive, heart-on-sleeve, tear-jerking music. And when it comes to knowing exactly how and when to pull on the strings, Osborne is a grand master. This is a wonderful work, perhaps one that takes a little effort to get into (especially given its subject matter, which not all audiences will necessarily understand, appreciate, or be able to relate to), but one that pays rich dividends with repeated listening. All of the participants are well suited to their roles, and turn in fine performances.

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