

Jan Peerce: Tenor brings serious music to all audiences

By SHIRLEE IDEN

The "Blue Bird of Happiness" flew into Southfield this week, charming a capacity audience at Congregation Shaarey Zedek.

Tenor Jan Peerce, who introduced "Blue Bird" in 1935, participated in a cultural first Monday.

It was the first Peter and Clara Weisberg Concert, a gift to the community from the Weisbergs and their children, long associated with the synagogue.

At a press conference preceding the concert, the 76-year-old Peerce admonished reporters: "Don't speak of me in the past tense."

"I'm here, still traveling, still performing, still accomplishing."

The diminutive tenor sings 50 concerts each year and will travel to Israel next week to play to accept an award and perform all over that country.

Peerce said when he introduced "Blue Bird of Happiness," which was written for him, he never thought it would be a success. And although he has rerecorded it three times, he sees greater significance in the song.

"What's important is that it brought more people into concert halls," he said. "They came to hear one song and then were introduced to serious music."

FOR PEERCE, music has always held center stage.

"I came from a very wonderful, low-gear Jewish home," he said. "My parents were not rich or poor, they had what every other neighbor had in the lower east side of Manhattan."

"Parents always want children to have something they didn't have themselves. My mother wanted to have a son who would study music. Not for a livelihood, but to know about the beauty and joy of music."

At age 4, Peerce, who was born Jacob Pinchus Perelmuth, began to study violin.

"I wanted piano, but we couldn't afford one," he said.

He recalled that every Jewish home in those days had at least a Caruso record and one by Mischa Elman. He grew up soaking in the music of the greats.

"You could go to a settlement house and for 10 cents hear great music then, and I heard all the greats."

Later, he was to sing with the best cantors, the best opera singers and the finest orchestras.

In adolescence he had a tenor voice and his mother told him: "You must sing in the synagogue."

Peerce says his parents also carefully tutored him on how to cultivate his voice when it was changing.

NEVERTHELESS, Peerce, who earned his first money with the violin, continued as a violinist. Today, he still pays dues to Local 802 of the violinists' section of a musician's union.

His accompanist, Alice Kalmowitz, was his childhood sweetheart, and now his wife of more than 50 years.

In Peerce's terms, she is his "greatest booster."

Peerce was encouraged to become a full-time singer and by 1933 was the

tenor-in-residence at Radio City Music Hall.

His benefactor was Samuel L. "Boss" Rothafel, who not only hired him at the Music Hall but paid for years of singing lessons with a top voice coach.

Since those years of struggle, has sung at the Metropolitan Opera, with Arturo Toscanini's NBC Orchestra, traveled worldwide as a concert singer, performed in nightclubs and the Broadway stage.

Ask him what his favorite medium is and he responds:

"My favorite medium is the one I'm doing when I'm doing it. I never do what I don't want to do."

"I love singing in opera, singing in the synagogue and doing shows like 'Fiddler.'"

Peerce, who has a repertoire of 40 operas, contends that the art of singing is "suffering" because of a lowering of

standards by opera managers and managers of singers.

"But many great singers are out there to be developed," he said. "Many great singers have never been at the Met or never even sang in this country."

COMMENTING on the state of the arts in this country, Peerce said that art has been put on a pedestal and some people are "afraid to tackle it."

"People have to be exposed to music, art and culture. We must show that it doesn't bite. There is exposure, but not enough of it. There should be a regular diet."

"We have so much money and we waste it on nonsense."

Just having passed his 76th birthday, Peerce said age has nothing to do with singing or playing.

An artist must be blessed first with good health, he believes, and then must develop techniques to conserve his voice.

"You don't sing when you're not supposed to sing. If you have a cold or aren't feeling well, don't sing."

He still practices daily to meet his criteria for a singer:

"The greatest compliment you can pay any singer is to say he's a vocalist and knows what to do with his voice."

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