

Music committee member Kent Allen recently spoke with Senior Cantor Laura Croen and Joyce Rosenzweig, our guest participant for this year's Shabbat Shira celebration.

"She really brings out the soul in the music" — Laura Croen on her mentor Joyce Rosenzweig

As tends to be true of long-lasting love affairs, Joyce Rosenzweig's passion for Jewish music didn't materialize quickly. She kind of fell into it over time, but once in, she became fully immersed and never looked back. It's now a four-decade romance.

A virtuoso pianist, conductor and teacher who is a longtime instructor at the Hebrew Union College (HUC) — Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music and the music director at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in Manhattan, Rosenzweig will be sharing that passion and her bountiful talents when she joins Senior Cantor Laura Croen for our annual Shabbat Shira evening on Feb. 24. The event kicks off a series of programs that will honor Cantor Croen, who is stepping down from her Temple Sinai position this summer after 29 years.

Rosenzweig is a longtime mentor to our retiring cantor; they first met while Cantor Croen was a cantorial student at HUC, where Rosenzweig had recently joined the faculty. Her early guidance, Cantor Croen says, was pivotal, and soon enough the cantor recognized in her mentor not only superb teaching skills but also a virtuosity in many realms.

"She's an amazing accompanist and interpreter of Jewish music, including Yiddish song," Cantor Croen says. When she was thinking about possible performers for this year's Shabbat Shira, Cantor Croen considered those who've made previous appearances but ultimately wanted a guest "who would be the most meaningful."

Rosenzweig fit that bill, and not only because of her own musical talents.

For in addition to performing, Rosenzweig will share with our congregation her impressions of how the cantorate, cantorial students and synagogue music in general have transformed over the past generation.

While her life is centered on Jewish music, it wasn't always thus. As a child growing up in Houston, Rosenzweig learned to play the piano, eventually majoring in it in college. She also took part in organized Jewish activities, including attendance at summer camps, where music plays a central role. But as a younger person, Rosenzweig would not have located religion or religious music at the core of her professional interest. The focus evolved.



After completing her college and graduate studies, Rosenzweig was soon in demand for performances, including with orchestras and other venues. One such assignment was as an accompanist at HUC.

At that point, a lightbulb went on.

“I had these two worlds going on and it never occurred to me till several years later that they were related,” Rosenzweig says. “It took many years to be fully embracing the fact that I loved Jewish music.” Eventually, HUC became a professional home for her.

In her many decades at HUC, she has participated in concerts with most of the cantors of this generation. She has also been an eyewitness to changes in the cantorate, from diversity in students’ backgrounds to their musical choices to their growing responsibilities as multi-tasking leaders of their congregations.

As to the tension between traditional and new music, Rosenzweig believes in a balanced approach.

“I love the classic music that we are inheritors of and believe it needs to stay alive,” she says. “It has great meaning for us.” But also, “I’m really open to the best of what is created today.”

Whatever the choice in music, Rosenzweig sees it as vital to life not only in the temple but life itself.

Among her favorite quotes is a Hasidic saying: “Music is the gateway to the soul, the ladder to our most intimate, profound and ecstatic encounters with the Divine.”

Elaborating on the theme, Rosenzweig finds that music “opens my soul. ... It’s about a vulnerability that words just fail at.”