

Literature

Forum

A SELECTIVE LIST OF CHORAL MUSIC IN HEBREW

JOSHUA R. JACOBSON

Joshua R. Jacobson is the founder and director of the Zamir Chorale of Boston. A composer and editor, he is also Assistant Professor of Music at Northeastern University and the author of several books on music.

The Zamir Chorale of Boston is a community chorus which devotes the majority of its repertoire to Jewish, Hebrew, and Biblical music. While there are only a few dozen organizations (outside of Israel) such as ours, we have recently been asked by many conductors of high school, college and community choruses to recommend some effective pieces of Hebrew or Jewish choral music.

The following is a list of seventeen non-liturgical works, eleven liturgical works, and five compositions of major proportions for those conductors who would like to avail themselves of a rich (and sometimes exotic) choral repertoire. These have been found to be quite effective in performance, and rewarding to both singers and conductors. With the exception of the motets of Salomone Rossi, all are twentieth century works.

To go into the question of "what is Hebrew/Jewish music?" would be too space consuming. I will just state that these works all have Hebrew or Yiddish texts, and many of them incorporate folksongs (or stylistic traits of these folksongs) that have been sung by the Jewish people.

SECULAR COMPOSITIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS

HAVU LANU YAYYIN, Matityahu Shelem, arranged by Gil Aldema, SATB (divisi), a capella, pub: RINAT. text: Matityahu Shelem. duration: 1'30".

A spirited folk-like melody in an ingratiating arrangement. The parts bounce

against one another in syncopated rhythms, constantly exchanging melody for counter-melody. The rhythms can be tricky, but otherwise this is not too difficult a piece to learn.

SIMCHU NA, Matityahu Shelem, arranged by Leonard Bernstein, SATB, piano. pub: MLU. text: Matityahu Shelem. duration: 2'30".

While the piano accompaniment provides the rhythmic syncopation and harmonic spice, the chorus sings mostly in unison, in octaves and fifths, and in canon. Not too difficult, but the sopranos and tenors must have a solid high A.

PSALMS OF WOE AND JOY, Robert Starer, SATB (divisi), piano, pub: MCA. text: Psalms. duration: 9'30".

Commissioned by the Zamir Chorale of Boston in 1976, this work is a dramatic setting in two movements. The first, slow and dark with ominous low tone-clusters, is set to the text, "Save me, O Lord, for I am weak." The second movement, "Praise the Lord, sun and moon," uses jubilant syncopations and irregular meters, and even a section of hand clapping and finger snapping. Somewhat difficult.

HAMAVIDIL, Oedon Partos, SATB, a capella, pub: MLU. text: Saturday night prayers, duration: 3'15".

Subtitled "A Choral Song on Sephardic Motives," Partos' work alternates between two contrasting textures — an undulating slow legato and a light allegro. Throughout there is clever interplay among the voice parts and a generous helping of oriental ornamentation and modality. Medium difficulty.

SHIR AHAVAH, Jef Labes, SATB (divisi), solo (any part), piano (or piano, drums, flute, and string bass), pub: ZCB, text: Jef Labes. duration: 5'30".

Labes, a professional pianist and arranger for pop and jazz musicians, wrote this work for the Zamir Chorale in 1970.

The style is reminiscent of "cool" jazz with an interesting superimposition of 6/8 and 3/4 meters. The instrumentalist(s) must have the ability to improvise in the appropriate style. Medium difficulty.

URI TSAFON, Dov Carmel, arranged by Yechezkel Braun, SATB, a capella, pub: MLU, text: The Song of Songs. duration: 2'45".

This homophonic composition is a description of the fragrances of King Solomon's garden. The lines are long and slow, requiring a sustained concept of phrasing; otherwise the work is fairly easy to learn.

HAVAH NAGILAH, folksong arranged by Daniel Faktori, SATB, a capella, pub: MLU, text: Moshe Nathanson, duration: 2'.

A very effective arrangement of the best-known of all Israeli folksongs. Faktori uses ingratiating countermelodies which add to the harmonic and rhythmic excitement. The only difficulty in teaching this composition will be in some of the rhythmic interplays.

AT ADAMAH, folksong arranged by Paul Ben-Haim, SATB, SAA solos, a capella, pub: MLU. text: A. Yechieli. duration: 1'45".

The middle-eastern qualities of this song are accentuated with changing meters and highlighted with varying textures. Medium to easy.

EMEK, Mark Lavri, SATB (divisi), a capella, pub: MLU, text: Raphael Eliaz, duration: 2'20".

A choral hymn to Israel's largest fertile area — the Valley of Jezreel. Slow legato sections (with characteristic near-eastern appoggiature) alternate with staccato dance-like sections, and build to an ending of climatic intensity. Not too difficult.

MIZMOREI TEHILLIM, Tzvi Avni, SATB, a capella, pub: MLU. text: Psalms. duration: 5'45".

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LITERATURE FORUM . . .

The first-prize winner in a 1967 Israeli Choral Festival (Zimriyah) competition, **Mizmorei Tehillim** is a setting of three Psalm texts in three movements. Avni skillfully incorporates certain characteristics of mid-eastern music into this composition. The outer movements are arresting in their bold rhythms and frequent metric changes, while the inner movement possesses an inner calm through the interweaving of mellifluous lines in a dorian-ish mode. Medium to somewhat difficult.

VEKIBATS'TI ET'CHEM, Chaim Alexander, SATB, a capella, pub: MLU, text: Psalms, Ezekiel; duration: 3'30".

This work was the winner of the 1952 Israeli Zimriyah competition. Although **Vekibats'ti Et'chem** does not have the same "near-eastern" quality that characterizes **Mizmorei Tehillim**, it is a fine composition utilizing basically three contrasting textures — a marcato proclamation, a legato almost-homophonic melody, and a bright rhythmic fugue. Not too difficult.

TEFILLAH, David Burger, arranged by David Burger and Mati Lazar, SATB (divisi) with piano (orchestration available), pub: ZCNY or ZCB, text: Prayer for the State of Israel, duration: 5'.

Although in a pop-folk idiom, this work has the variety and intensity of an artful composition. The pianist must be able

to improvise his/her own accompaniment based on a chord chart. Not too difficult.

SIX MADRIGALS, Herbert Fromm, a capella, pub: Trans., texts: various liturgies and religious folk-poetry; 1. **SABBATH** — SATB, 50"; 2. **PURIM** — SATB, 2'; 3. **HANUKKAH** — SATB, S solo, 1'; 4. **THE NINTH OF AV** — SATBSATB, 3'30"; 5. **PASS-OVER** — SATBSATB, 2'10"; 6. **SUKKOT** — SATB, 4'10".

Well-crafted miniatures depicting sacred days in the Jewish year in a tasteful contemporary idiom. The **Hanukkah** madrigal is rather easy (and is the only one published separately), but the others require some intensive work.

URI TSIYON, Moshe Wilensky, SATB, a capella, pub: MLU, text: Isaiah, duration: 2'30".

This hora-type melody is sure to be a programming favorite. The composer's own arrangement makes effective use of counterpoint, dynamic contrasts, sudden key-changes, and rhythmic verve. Not difficult tonally, but the rhythms will take some practicing.

YELED LI NITAN, Mark Lavri, SATB, a capella, pub: MLU, text: Saul Tschernikowsky, duration: 3'20".

This lullabye of the Israeli pioneers of fifty years ago is given a beautiful setting by Lavri. Its soft dynamics and opportunities for rounded phrasing make this seemingly easy work a vehicle for a virtuoso choral sound. (I recommend transposing it up a half step.)

THE RAINBOW, Daniel Pinkham, SATB (divisi), narrator, organ, electronic tape, percussion (two players): glockenspiel, vibraphone, giant tam tam, two bongos, two tom-toms; pub: ECS, text: Ecclesiasticus, Genesis, and Psalms; duration: 8'20".

This work, commissioned by the Zamir Chorale of Boston in 1977, is divided into three movements. In the first movement, the tape, supplemented by aleatoric choral and instrumental sounds, creates the sonic image of a rainbow. The second movement has the chorus and organ in homophonic declamation joined by a pointilistic vibraphone. In the final movement the chorus sings mostly unison with syncopated rhythms over changing meters accented by the bongos and tom-toms. While it does have a definite tonal center (and is not too way-out for even conservative audiences), the harmonic language is characterized by some sharp dissonances, often resulting from the confluence of the voice parts (in the manner of medieval music). Somewhat difficult.

LE-MOSHEL (sung in Yiddish), Simon Sargon, SATB, SATB solos, piano and clarinet, pub: manuscript (for information, contact the ZCB), text: anonymous Yiddish folklore, duration: 16'.

A setting of 15 Yiddish proverbs which capture the humor and the pathos of early twentieth century Eastern-European Jewry. The music covers a melange of styles, but nonetheless achieves an overall unity. While most sections are fairly easy, a few are rather difficult.

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LITURGICAL MUSIC

(music composed specifically for Synagogue use, but which is also suitable for concert programming)

KIDDUSH, Kurt Weill, SATB (divisi), tenor soloist, piano, pub: G. Schirmer, text: Sabbath sanctification of the wine, duration: 3'15".

Weill's only venture into the Jewish liturgy is a fascinating one. The writing combines bluesy harmonic progressions with whole-tone excursions and a quasi-cantorial style. Not too difficult.

HASHKIVENU, Leonard Bernstein, SATB (divisi), tenor soloist, organ, pub: Witmark, text: Friday evening liturgy, duration: 6'.

Bernstein's only Jewish liturgical composition (to date) is from the period of the Jeremiah Symphony (to which it bears certain specific motivic and structural resemblances). It is in ABA form. The "A" is a simple smoothly-flowing canon in the phrygian mode (over an organ pedal-point). In contrast, the "B" section has jazzy syncopated rhythms in a basically homophonic texture with angular melodic leaps. Medium to somewhat difficult.

YIH'YU LERATSON, Ernest Bloch, SATB, a capella, pub: Broude, text: Sabbath liturgy, duration: 1'50".

A short section taken from the beginning of the third movement of the *Avodat Hakodesh* (see below) which can stand as an effective concert piece by itself.

SH'MA KOLENU and HASHKIVENU, Charles Davidson, SATB, Tenor (or baritone) soloist, optional piano or organ, pub: TRANS, texts: the Sabbath Liturgy, durations (respectively) 3'20" and 7'30".

The emphasis in both these pieces is on the soloist who is given a melody in the modes and coloratura style of the Eastern European cantors. Yet the choral parts (homophonic throughout) provide a tasteful quasi-impressionistic harmonization. The chorus shouldn't have too much difficulty with these, but the soloist must be quite capable.

SIM SHALOM, Max Janowsky, SATB, tenor soloist, piano or organ, pub: FJMP, text: the Sabbath liturgy, duration: 4'25".

AVINU MALKENU, Max Janowsky, SATB (divisi), tenor soloist, piano or organ, pub: FJMP, text: the High Holiday liturgy, duration: 3'20".

Janowsky's liturgical settings are simple and direct, based on a folk style, with much use of unison and homophonic textures and "catchy" melodies. One can easily see how these attributes make the music well-suited to singing by the "volunteer" synagogue choir and acceptable to the ears of the congregation. But for these very same reasons, (and due to Janowsky's tastefulness) these works are excellent (light) concert programming.

AL NAHAROT BAVEL, Salomone Rossi, SATB, a capella, pub: JTS/TP, text: Psalm 137, duration: 4'.

Working at the Court of Mantua in

the early seventeenth century, Rossi was the only Jew to compose serious polyphonic music before the "enlightenment". In 1623 he published a volume of thirty-three "Psalms, songs and hymns set to music for three, four, five, six, seven, and eight voices." These Hebrew motets were performed in some Italian synagogues and then were forgotten until rediscovered in the late nineteenth century.

The voice ranges of *Al Naharot Bavel* are somewhat unusual. It can be performed ATTB, TTBB, or transposed up a whole step for SATB. This motet contains some interesting "word painting". The predominantly homophonic texture makes this work fairly easy to learn.

ELOKIM HASHIVENU, Salomone

Rossi, SATB, a capella, pub: JTS/TP, text: Psalm 80, duration: 2'30".

Some lovely spots of two-part counterpoint alternate with tutti sections. This is the most melismatic of the motets. Medium difficulty.

HALELUYAH, Salomone Rossi, SATB, a capella, pub: JTS/TP, text: Psalm 146, duration: 2'15"; not difficult.

KEDUSHAH (QETER), Salomone Rossi, SATB, a capella, pub: JTS/TP, text: Sabbath liturgy, duration: 2'15"; not difficult.

BAR'CHU, Salomone Rossi, SAB, a capella, pub: JTS/TP, text: daily liturgy, duration: 1'15"; easy.

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LITERATURE FORUM . . .

Because of its brevity, **Bar'chu** is most effective in concert when linked to another of the motets. An interesting juxtaposition can be had by performing the first 25 bars of **Bar'chu** with solo trio, the remaining 13 bars with a chamber chorus, and then following (attacca) with **Kedushah** performed by a full chorus.

AVODAT HAKODESH (SACRED SERVICE). Ernest Bloch. SATB (divisi), baritone solo, incidental SSA solos, large orchestra. pub: Broude, text: Sabbath morning liturgy, duration: 52 minutes.

In five movements, the **Sacred Service** is undisputedly the masterpiece of Jewish liturgical music. Because of its size and universality, though, it is at least as appropriate for the concert stage as it is for the Synagogue. An intensely dramatic work, it is built around a six-note motif (G-A-C-B-A-G) which unifies the entire composition. Although written in the 1930's, the language is post-romantic/impressionistic with a generous helping of modality. The choral parts are of medium difficulty; the baritone soloist must have a large, dramatic voice.

CHICHESTER PSALMS. Leonard Bernstein, SATB (divisi), boy alto solo, incidental SATB solos, large orchestra of strings, brass and percussion; pub: G. Schirmer, text: Psalms, duration: 20 minutes.

This 1965 work presents the dramatic Bernstein as well as the Broadway Bernstein. The first movement, after an explosive outburst, bounces along in a sprightly jubilant 7/4 meter. The second movement features a delightfully lyrical and naively simple solo for boy alto joined by women's chorus, juxtaposed against a raucous male chorus outburst (this will be the most difficult section to teach). The third movement provides a contemplative ending in a smoothly flowing 10/4 time.

SERVICE SACRÉ, Darius Milhaud. SATB, baritone solo, small orchestra, pub: Salabert, text: Sabbath liturgy, duration: 56'.

Light and lyrical, this work does not have the overwhelming punch of the Bloch **Service**, but it does have a unique Gallic charm.

KOL NIDRE, Arnold Schoenberg. SATB, male narrator, large orchestra, pub: Boelke Momart, text: based on the Kaballah, and the liturgy for Yom Kippur; duration: 11'.

The orchestral sections, based on a tone-row, are quite dense and rhythmically complex. The choral parts (as well as a few of the purely orchestral parts) though, are clearly tonal, and based on the centuries-old chant for Yom Kippur. The audience should have no problems with this Schoenberg, because of its dramatic word-painting, colorful orchestration, and incorporation of the chant theme. The choral parts are fairly easy.

TIKUN CHATSOT (MIDNIGHT VIGIL), Mordecai Seter, SATB large choir, SATB small choir I, SATB small choir II. Tenor solo, large orchestra,

pub: IMI, text: based on the Rabbinic literature, duration: 32'.

A dramatic oratorio based on the dream-like visions that come to a worshiper in the synagogue late at night. Saturated with the modes and rhythmic patterns of the Arab Jews. Medium difficulty.

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FJMP — Friends of Jewish Music, 8252 So. Woodlawn Ave., Chicago 19, IL.

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TRANS — Transcontinental Music Corp., 838 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10021.

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

I have written a multi-movement, 100-plus page Jewish sacred service scored for chorus, band and baritone, and am currently looking for performers who would undertake a first performance. I would very much appreciate any advice you might be able to give me in this regard. (It has been my experience that finding interested choral directors is more difficult than finding interested band directors.) Thank you very much.

Yours truly,

Fred Blumenthal
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