

Rabbis, Politics, and Music: Leon Modena and Salamone Rossi

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Leon Modena was born in Venice in 1571, about the same time that Salamone Rossi was born in Mantua. An examination of their lives reveals a few instances of demonstrable creative interaction between them, leaves open the possibility of many other undocumented occasions, and shows the vitality of Jewish music in early-modern Italy.

The ghetto was a setting for economic and cultural growth and the establishment of one correlated with the development of Jewish art music in the various cities of northern Italy. Indeed, contemporaries considered a ghetto to be an ideal place to live. In 1573 the Turks also asked for a place of their own, “as the Jews have their ghetto,” and in Padua the Jews celebrated each year the ghetto was established.

Along with the traditional Jewish subjects, Hebrew and Latin writing, and preaching, Modena’s studies included how to play music, to sing, and to dance, an education that was not at all unique for Jews in early-modern Italy at this time.

After the wealthy members of the Venetian Jewish community raised the age of ordination, which reduced Modena’s chances to serve as a rabbi in Venice, he taught children, adults, and Christians, composed letters for others including the rabbis, wrote poetry for books and for gravestone inscriptions, published popular books, preached, edited and expedited the publishing of Hebrew books, was involved in alchemy, and gambled.

At this time Rossi began to publish his collections of music, usually in Venice, which involved his presence there to supervise the publishing. In Venice, on Sept. 16, 1600, which happened to fall on *Shabbat Shuvah*, he dedicated his first book of madrigals to Vincenzo Gonzaga I, Duke of Mantua (1587–1612).

Tensions between Venetian rabbis and local rabbis in northern Italy peaked in a dispute over a ritual bath, a *mikveh*, in Rovigo, a small town between Padua and Ferrara, which ultimately divided much of Italian Jewry and which is relevant for subsequent musical developments. In 1594, Rabbi Avtalion Consiglio questioned the fitness of his brother’s *mikveh*, built his own, and forbade others from using his brother’s. His brother, Yekutiel, instigated a massive outpouring of opinions, basically divided between those who supported the authority of the Venetian rabbinate (and Yekutiel) and those who supported the local rabbis (and Avtalion). Many members of Modena’s family joined those who supported the local rabbis, which drew Leon Modena away from the Venetian rabbinate.

Meanwhile, in 1603, Modena left Venice to live in Ferrara. There he worked for a wealthy family, teaching, arranging matches, and supervising a vineyard as well as preaching, writing, and functioning as a rabbi. Soon after his arrival, the musical activities of the Jews of Ferrara were renewed by the creation of a musical organization and the hiring of a music teacher who may even have been Modena. Now that he was functioning as a rabbi, Modena's decision to support one or the other faction in the *mikveh* dispute was expected. Private correspondence indicates that Modena drew close to those who opposed the leading Venetian rabbis, but he decided not to issue any public pronouncements.

Modena's caution soon paid off. In the Great Synagogue of Ferrara, on holidays, festivals, and Sabbaths, six to eight, maybe ten, members of the community would sing artistic renditions of songs and prayers such as *Yigdal*, *Eyn Keloheyenu*, *Alenu*, and *Adon Olam* before a large and enthusiastic audience. On Friday evening, July 30, 1605, a choral musical presentation took place in honor of *Shabbat Nahamu*, the Sabbath of consolation after the mourning for the destruction of the Temple on the Ninth of Av. The performance, therefore, fell around the time of *Tu be-Av*, the Fifteenth of Av, an ancient Jewish holiday of joy. In modern Hebrew literature, in the Zionist movement, in the State of Israel, and at Jewish summer camps, *Tu be-Av* became known as *Yom ha-Ahavah*, associated with musical and dance festivals. This performance in Ferrara may have been one of the first ever.

Despite the success of this musical presentation, and the involvement of most of the rabbinic scholars in the city, one rabbi, because he believed that after exile and the destruction of the Temple it was forbidden for the Jews to rejoice with any art music at all, opposed it, ridiculed it, even tried to expel the performers.

To defend the musical performance, Modena wrote a rabbinic responsum. He presented and refuted all possible arguments against Jewish music. He also included examples of contemporary practices: on Simchat Torah there are cantors who dance in the synagogue with the Torah in their arms and assistant cantors who sing in harmony (what he calls an aria) along with some Ashkenazic cantors in need of help when their voices cannot carry. Modena asserts that if Jews discontinued musical training they would become an object of mockery among the other nations who would say that the Jews scream like dogs and ravens at God.

Warily, Modena turned to Venice for an endorsement, afraid that he had alienated the rabbis there because of his relationship with their opponents in the battle over the *mikveh* at Rovigo. Accordingly, when Modena wrote to them about the matter of music he felt the need to review the events of the *mikveh* controversy and to assure them of his present lack of involvement in it.

To Modena's surprise and delight, they quickly agreed to approve his responsum five days after the music was presented in the synagogue. When Modena wrote to thank them for their generous endorsement of his responsum on music, he felt it necessary to allay their fears that although he had received their support, he would still maintain his discretion concerning the matter of the *mikveh*.

In 1610, as he approached forty, Modena received his ordination from the Venetian rabbis. He returned again to Venice—this time from Florence—to serve not only as a rabbi but as a cantor, with his pleasant tenor voice. It must have been an exciting time to serve as a cantor in Venice, where Claudio Monteverdi, fired in Mantua, became the choir leader at St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice in 1612, marking a major event for art and music in the city.

In Venice, Modena also served as an expert in Hebrew publishing. In 1622, he was in charge of editing, arranging, and proofreading the first book of Hebrew music ever published, *Hashirim Asher Lishlomo* by Salamone Rossi. In 1622, Rossi was in Venice, where at that other books of music in press. While in Venice he and Modena met and became friends. Modena claims that he pleaded with Rossi to publish his choral music for the synagogue, written for religious festivals, special Sabbaths, and weddings. Modena notes that he had no model for a Hebrew music book and had to solve the problem of how to print Hebrew and music, which are read in opposite directions. He decided to print both from left to right because he felt that most singers knew the Psalms and liturgical pieces by heart and did not read the words carefully when they sang.

While Modena was working on this music book, the night before the first Passover seder in 1622, eight young Jewish men murdered his son Zevulun in an ambush, apparently in a rivalry over a woman. The murder interrupted Modena's work on the publication. Since his son's death he had personally eschewed music, but he felt that delaying the publication of Rossi's book too long would deprive the Jewish community of an important work and the opportunity for a large number of children to be inspired to learn music. He was also concerned over the prospects of opposition to the music by those whom he called "self-proclaimed pious ones," or "pseudo-pious ones," *mithasdim*, and whom he chided for drawing away from all that is new and all wisdom that they could not understand. The published edition of Rossi's Hebrew music book included a preface by Modena, a dedication to Moses Sullam, and a copyright. Modena included the responsum he wrote in 1605 in Ferrara in support of music.

During the summer of 1628 hostilities broke out in Mantua in the struggle for succession after the death of the last Gonzaga duke, Vincenzo II, in 1627. Many fled from Mantua to Venice, among them a large number of musicians, some of whom were Jewish. In around 1628 in the Venetian ghetto, an academy of music was organized with Modena serving as the Maestro di Cappella. It was called the *Accademia degli Impediti*, the Academy of the Hampered, named in derision of the traditional Jewish reluctance to perform music because of "the unhappy state of captivity which hampers every act of competence." In this spirit, especially in light of Modena's responsum on music in 1605, the Accademia took the Latin motto *Cum Recordaremur Sion*, and in Hebrew, *Bezokhrenu et Tzion*, when we remembered Zion, based paradoxically on Psalm 137, one of the texts invoked against Jewish music: "We hung up our harps.... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" The Accademia met twice a week in the evenings under the sponsorship of the communal leaders and the wealthy Jews.

According to Giulio Morosini (who, as Samuel Nachmias, had studied with Modena and who later converted to Christianity, changed his name, and wrote a massive tome, *Via della Fede*, to vindicate his decision) for Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah in October 1628, a spectacular musical performance was held in the Spanish synagogue, which had been decorated with silver and jewels. Two choirs sang artistic Hebrew renderings of the afternoon service, the evening service, and some psalms. Their extensive repertoire lasted a few hours. A throng of Christian noblemen and ladies attended the Simchat Torah service. The applause was great and police had to guard the gates to ensure order. Among the instruments brought into the synagogue was also an organ, which Morosini notes was not permitted by the rabbis because it was played in churches. In a similar vein, at about the same time, Rabbi Abraham Graziano of Modena (d. 1683) wrote, "Jewish musicians should not be prevented from playing on the organ [to accompany] songs and praises performed [in honor of] God...." Echoing the concerns heard in Morosini, Graziano dismissed the idea that Jews playing the organ constituted an imitation of non-Jewish practices and that only ignoramuses would oppose it.

It seems that Salamone Rossi was also in Venice at around this time based on his dedicatory letter at the beginning of his collection of "Madrigaletti for Two Voices, Opus XIII," which bears the date January 3, 1628. This date, if written in Venice, however, may be according to the Venetian style of dating which observed the New Year on March 1 rather than January 1. If this were the case, the letter was actually written in January 1629, possibly extending what is known about Rossi's life an additional year. Despite much speculation, there is no evidence of Rossi's involvement in musical activities at this time in Venice, but the arrival of musicians from Mantua and the sudden increase in musical activities indicate the possibilities that either the two had again collaborated or at least that there was a large number of Jewish musicians at this time.

The date of Rossi's death may be learned from the fact that during the Plague, on August 15, 1630, when Modena prepared the manuscript edition of his responsa collection, *Ziknei Yehudah*, above the text of his responsum on music from 1605, Modena indicated that this one was also published in the book of music by the late Mr. Salamone Rossi. If this epithet was written by Modena at the time of editing and not by a later copyist, it is evidence that by 1630 Rossi was dead, and he was not a rabbi.

This plague of 1629–1631 decimated the Accademia. In 1639 Modena still worked with a music academy, now called *Compagnia dei Musici del Ghetto di Venezia*. Modena reflects on the once vibrant Jewish musical scene in Venice by noting that now it no longer met regularly, lost the best members it had, and lacked productive composers. In August, Modena wrote on behalf of the society to accept an offer from another music society to collaborate, further evidence of the popularity of Jewish music.

By the 1640s Rossi had died and Modena was aged and limited in his activities, but synagogue music continued in Italy and so did opposition to it. In places like Pesaro and Senegallia dual choirs continued to perform on Shemini Atzeret, which produced opposition, interruptions of the service, extensive rabbinic responsa, and involvement by the secular authorities. Some

rabbis continued to rely on the same passages to oppose music, to overlook the passages which allowed it, and to insist on an absolute ban against it. To resolve these conflicts, proponents of synagogue music invoked Modena's responsum of 1605. This work continued to circulate in manuscript and was republished a few times. The issue of synagogue music again erupted in the 19th century, especially around the question of the use of the organ in early Reform temples. One of the authorities invoked at this time was Hayyim Ventura, the name of the man who served as Leon Modena's assistant cantor. The communal politics in Venice that prevented Modena from entering the rabbinate in Venice at a younger age put him in a position where his work in music and publishing enabled him to preserve the legacy of Salamone Rossi both as an advocate of Jewish music and as an editor of his Hebrew music books, music that still lives today.

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