

LITERATURE FORUM



Music of the Jewish People

by

Joshua R. Jacobson

I avoid using the term “Jewish music.” How can music be Jewish? Does music keep kosher? Is music circumcised? No—people can be Jewish, and that’s why I prefer the terminology “Music of the Jewish People.”

It is complicated. Is Jewish a religion, a nationality, a race, or ethnicity? In which Repertoire & Standards category does Jewish music belong—Music for Worship or Ethnic and Multicultural perspectives or neither? Shall we juxtapose Jewish music with Catholic music or perhaps with French music or Hispanic music? But then where would we place Franz Schubert’s *Tov Lehodot*, a setting of

a synagogue Psalm in Hebrew—Catholic or Jewish? Where would we place Darius Milhaud’s *Service Sacré*, a setting of the synagogue liturgy—French or Jewish? And what about Yehezkel Braun’s *Seven Sephardic Folksongs*—Hispanic or Jewish? Why not both? And why not place Ernest Bloch’s *Sacred Service* in the same category as Brahms’s *German Requiem*—simply great music for a concert?

A few years ago, I heard an honor choir at an ACDA national conference performing a synagogue motet by Salamone Rossi (c.1570–c.1630) in a program of “ethnic and multicultural” music. I was thrilled to hear it performed, but Rossi’s motets are no more multicultural than are those of his better-known colleague Monteverdi. The lyrics are Hebrew, and the original performance venue was a synagogue in Mantua, but the style is hardly different from that of Christian composers of the late Renaissance/early Baroque era.

Let us say that traditional Jewish music is music that has been used by Jews more than by others and therefore has become associated with Jewish people. And let us say that a Jewish choral composition is one that either incorporates elements of traditional Jewish music or uses a Jewish text (a text associated with Jewish people) or is in a Jewish language or is descriptive of Jewish people or is

intended for use in a Jewish ritual.

We should not pretend that anything written by a Jew is Jewish music. (Although the Nazis in 1930’s Germany did assert that any music composed or even performed by a Jew was “degenerate.”) Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas” isn’t Jewish music. But do you have to be Jewish to compose Jewish music? I would include in our category Eric Whitacre’s *Five Hebrew Love Songs*, Franz Schubert’s *Tov Lehodot*, and Modest Mussorgsky’s cantata *Joshua Bin-Nun*.

Do you have to be Jewish to perform Jewish music? Of course not! Someone who is steeped in Jewish culture and tradition may, however, have a head start in regard to familiarity with the language, the context, and the subtleties of performance practice. I have conducted Ramirez’s *Misa Criolla*, but a conductor from Argentina would have an advantage over me. I have conducted choral arrangements of African American spirituals, but someone who is steeped in that tradition would certainly bring a lot more to the table.

The first time I conducted Handel’s *Messiah* at Northeastern University, an Irish Catholic student in the chorus came up to me after the concert. She said to me, “How can a Jew like you conduct Handel’s *Messiah*?” I stammered something about a musical performer being like an actor: you assume a persona

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while you are on stage then go back to being who you are. But maybe she had a point. Take three conductors of equal musical competence—one is a devout Christian, another is a devout agnostic, and the third is a devout Jew. Which of the three will deliver a performance of Handel's *Messiah* that best represents the sentiments of the composer? And which of the three would be the best interpreter of Bloch's *Sacred Service*? It is complicated.

Here is another complication. Scattered for nearly two millennia, Jews absorbed the culture of the people among

whom they lived. Jewish music became acculturated with the soundscapes of various majority populations. As a result there are many Jewish musics, especially with regard to non-sacred songs. The folk songs of the Jews of Yemen sound very different from those of their co-religionists in Germany, Morocco, Ukraine, etc.

There is not a tremendous amount of repertoire for this genre of Jewish music. Formal synagogue choirs didn't appear until the nineteenth century (although there are a few notable exceptions from the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries). Until the twentieth century, aside from the language, this music was by and large modeled after and sounded remarkably similar to choral music written for Christian churches. So the music of Salamone Rossi may remind listeners of the motets of Orlando di Lasso; Salomon Sulzer's choral music was modeled after the part songs of his friend Franz Schubert; Louis Lewandowski's compositions drew their inspiration from Felix Mendelssohn. In the past hundred years, however, perhaps inspired by Bartok and other nationalists, many synagogue composers have attempted to infuse

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their music with the modes and rhythms of traditional Jewish chant. Among those composers who went in this direction are Lazare Saminsky, Ernest Bloch, Paul Ben-Haim, Samuel Adler, and Yehudi Wyner:

Choirs formed for the purpose of singing secular Jewish music are not found until the beginning of the twentieth century: first in Poland, and soon thereafter throughout Europe in the land of Israel and in North and South America. The repertoire for these ensembles consisted of arrangements of Jewish folk songs and original compositions and classic choral works based on “Old Testament” librettos. Composers and arrangers rose to the challenge to provide these ensembles with appropriate material.

Conductors looking for Hebrew choral music should begin with the fourth volume in *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire*.¹ It has lists of recommended repertoire, helpful essays, indices, and a comprehensive pronunciation guide. But not all Jewish choral music is in Hebrew. There are lovely folk songs, theater songs, and art songs in Yiddish, a hybrid language, similar to German, spoken by many Jews in Northern Europe. There is a rich repertoire of *romanceros* and other folk songs, of Jews living in the Mediterranean basin. Many of these Jews traced their ancestry back to Spain before being driven out by the Inquisition in 1492. Their patois was Ladino, a language derived from old Castilian Spanish. Of course, many Jews wrote music expressing their identity in the language of the country in which they lived, so you can also find Jewish choral music in plain American English².

Some of the greatest composers have contributed to this repertoire. Leonard Bernstein is known for his *Chichester Psalms*, but conductors should also consider his *Kaddish Sym-*

phony, Hashkivenu and several shorter pieces. Ernest Bloch's *Sacred Service* is fairly well known, but Darius Milhaud's charming *Service Sacré*, a setting of the same liturgy, deserves to be performed more frequently. Arnold Schoenberg's contribution includes *Kol Nidre, A Survivor from Warsaw*, and *De Profundis*, a setting in the original Hebrew of Psalm 130. Kurt Weill wrote a bluesy setting of the Friday night *Kiddush* (dedicated to his father, who was the chief cantor of Dessau), as well as a cantata, *The Eternal Road* (recently rereleased by Schott as *The Road of Promise*).

Alice Parker was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists to write *An American Kedushah*, a setting from the Saturday morning sanctification liturgy. Modest Mussorgsky's cantata, *Joshua Bin-Nun*, is based on a Hassidic melody. Opera composer Jacques Halévy (son of Cantor Elie Halévy) composed *Min Ha-Metsar*, a setting in Hebrew of verses from Psalm 118. Franz Schubert was commissioned by his friend Cantor Salomon Sulzer to compose *Tov Lehodos*, a setting in Hebrew of Psalm 92. And most readers will be familiar with Eric Whitacre's *Five Hebrew Love Songs* based on poetry by the composer's Israeli wife, Hila Plitmann.

Consider also that when you choose repertoire, whatever you choose, do so because you believe that it is great music, not because you think it's politically correct to be multicultural. Chanukah, for example, is not the Jewish Christmas. Chanukah is (at least it used to be) a minor holiday on the Jewish calendar. Sometimes tokenism is worse than neglect. Yes, Virginia, there are some good choral pieces for Chanukah, but December isn't the only month to program “Music of the Jewish People.” There is a wealth of wonderful music from Jewish traditions available for programming the year round—not just because it's Jewish,

but because it's good music.

NOTES

¹ Ethan Nash and Joshua Jacobson, *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire—Volume IV: Hebrew Texts* (earthsongs, 2009).

² Visit <<http://www.joshuajacobson.org>> for an annotated list of recommended repertoire.

Choral Music of the Muslim World

by
André de Quadros

Music of the Muslim world and particularly its choral music is little understood or known. This is largely due to three elements that are misunderstood and contested: Muslim music, Muslim world, and Muslim choral music. This article will offer a brief overview of each of these elements, with a list of suggestions for further reading on page 73.

Muslim Music

Islamic scholars hotly dispute the role of music in Islam. In representing their divergent positions, they refer not only

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