

Salamone Rossi's Synagogue Motets The 400th anniversary — Joshua R. Jacobson

Four hundred years ago, on October 5, 1622 the Bragadini Publishers in Venice issued a collection of polyphonic motets the likes of which had never been seen before.¹ This was an anthology of motets not for the church, but for the synagogue, with lyrics not in Latin, but in Hebrew. Composed by the Mantuan Jew Salamone Rossi, this unique collection was destined to remain the only one of its kind for several centuries.

For many years, the musical soundscape of the synagogue had remained insular. The core of the liturgy was the “reading” of the Bible utilizing a set of fixed traditional cantillation motifs, performed modally and monophonically by a soloist in free rhythm. The rest of the service, the chanting of prayers, allowed for slightly more improvisation, but, like biblical cantillation, was based on traditional modes, in free rhythm, with no harmony or instrumental accompaniment.² The emphasis was on piety rather than on beauty.

But under the influence of the humanistic spirit of the Renaissance in northern Italy, there was increasing interaction between Jewish and Christian communities. In 1516 Jews were permitted for the first time to establish permanent residences in the city of Venice, on an island that was the former site of a foundry, called “*ghetto*” in Italian (or “*getto*” in the Venetian dialect).

Many Jews were becoming increasingly bicultural, fluent in the language, customs, literature, dance and music of Italy, while at the same time retaining adherence to their ancestral religious traditions. Perhaps the most famous of these bicultural Jews was Rabbi Leon Modena (1571–1648), who served as an intermediary between the Jewish and Christian communities.³ Modena credits himself as the one who suggested to Salamone Rossi that he compose synagogue music in the styles of contemporaneous church music.

We don't know much about Salamone Rossi. He was born *circa* 1570. His first published music is a book of nineteen canzonets printed in 1589.⁴ His last published music is dated 1628, a book of two-part *madrigaletti*. And after that there is nothing. Perhaps he died in the plague of 1628. Perhaps he died during the Austrian invasion in 1630. We just don't know.

His published output consists of six books of madrigals, one book of canzonets, one *balletto* from an opera, one book of *madrigaletti*, four books of instrumental works (sonatas, sinfonias, and various dance pieces), and the path-breaking collection of synagogue motets—in all, some 313 compositions published between 1589 and 1628. Rossi also composed music for a renowned Jewish theatre ensemble, but, alas, none of it was published, none has survived.⁵

Rossi was employed at the ducal palace in Mantua, where he served as a violinist and composer. He was quite the *avant garde* composer. His trio sonatas are among the first to appear in print.⁶ Rossi's madrigals are based on texts by the most modern poets of his time, and he was one of the earliest composers to publish them with continuo accompaniment.⁷ His first book of madrigals

(1600) featured an optional chitarrone tablature appearing with the canto part book.⁸ His second book of madrigals (1602) included a basso continuo part, placing it in the vanguard of experiments with accompanied monody, and antedating by three years Monteverdi's first attempt at concerted madrigals.⁹

Many of these publications were extremely popular. His first book of madrigals was reprinted three times, the second book twice, and the fourth book once.¹⁰ Nineteen of the madrigals appear in the manuscript collections of the English amateur musician Francis Tregian. Two of his canzonets were adapted by the English composer Thomas Weelkes and appear (without attribution to Rossi) in Weelkes' *Ayres or Phantasticke Spirites for Three Voices* (1608).¹¹

At the Mantuan court, Rossi worked alongside as many as thirty Christian musicians—composers, instrumentalists, and singers, including Claudio Monteverdi and Giovanni Gastoldi. But, as far as we know, Rossi was the only Jew. Each night Rossi returned to his home in the Jewish section of Mantua, where he lived, and where he worshipped.¹² But influenced by his friend, Rabbi Leon Modena, Rossi would poke a hole in the cultural boundary line. In a daring innovation, Rossi introduced polyphonic music into the synagogue, bringing the extramural music of the Christian world into the ghetto. In 1622 thirty-three of Rossi's Hebrew motets were published in Venice. The title of the collection, *Ha-shirim Asher Lishlomo (The Songs of Solomon)*, not only refers to the name of the author (Salamone is the Italian form of *Shelomo* or Solomon), but playing on the name of a book of the Hebrew Bible, *Shir Ha-shirim Asher Lishlomo* (The Song of Songs of Solomon), also gave the music an implied intertextual sacred stamp of approval.

This music is quite different from the traditional semi-improvised liturgical music of the synagogue. It was sung by a small group that had been rehearsing; during their performance the rest of the congregation would be silent. The cantor would sing as one of the men in this small choir. While traditional synagogue music was rhythmically free, this music has a steady *tactus*. This music is tonal; it bears no relation to the Middle Eastern modes. Unlike traditional synagogue music, which is monophonic (or heterophonic), this music is polyphonic. It sounds virtually indistinguishable from a church motet, except for one thing: the language is Hebrew – the lyrics are from the liturgy of the synagogue, where this music was performed.

While this work represented a bold innovation for the synagogue, it did not differ greatly from the conventions of early Baroque music. Like contemporary collections of sacred music, it contained a variety of liturgical forms. These thirty-three motets, set for from three to eight voice parts, include psalms, hymns and prayers for the Sabbath and holiday services (or for concerts of sacred music) and one wedding ode.

Having virtually no precedent in the polyphonic setting of the synagogue liturgy, Rossi was free to borrow, alter or reject a wide variety of styles, Middle Eastern and Western. Wisely, he did not attempt to employ any of the musical characteristics of the ancient Jewish chants. Their oriental modality, rhythmic freedom and improvisatory nature would not have blended well with contemporary techniques of European polyphony. Instead, Rossi availed himself of the current styles of European art-music—sacred and secular—from *stile antico* polyphony to the nascent trends in monody, *cori spezzati*, and *seconda prattica* chromaticism.

Yet the composer still felt himself bound to certain traditions of the synagogue. In deference to the rabbinic prohibition against instrumental music in the synagogue, Rossi set the entire collection for unaccompanied chorus. Of course, it may be surmised that if performances took place outside of the synagogue, instruments might have been used to double (or substitute for) voices, as was a widespread practice of the time. Although there are few direct references to indicate whether the treble parts would have been sung by women or men, we may assume the latter.¹³ Like the Christian church fathers, the Rabbis did not allow mixed voices in the worship service.

In all of the motets, clarity of text is paramount. In order that the words be easily understood by the listener, the composer for the most part availed himself of a predominantly homophonic texture, with imitative polyphony used only occasionally as points of contrast. This again represents a moving away from the older Renaissance "motet style" in which the prevailing texture was one of continuous imitation with occasional sections of homophony interspersed for contrast. Examining Rossi's bass parts, one can see a hallmark of the new Baroque style: the emergence of the vocal bass as a true harmonic bass, rather than as a participant in equal voice polyphony.

The modern homophonic texture, at that time still infrequently heard in church music, was a perfect vehicle for conveying the text to the congregation in the clearest possible manner.¹⁴ Rossi could not have been unaware of the musical reforms of the Catholic church that were influencing the composition of church music in Mantua, as elsewhere. The Council of Trent (1562) advised that ". . . the whole plan of singing . . . should be constituted . . . in such a way that the words may be clearly understood by all, and thus the hearts of the listener be drawn to the desire of heavenly harmonies."¹⁵

As far as we know there were no precedents for Rossi's innovation. Certainly the composer himself believed that was the case. Figure 1 shows the title page of Rossi's 1622 publication of his thirty-three polyphonic motets for the synagogue. Notice the words "new in the land." The title page, like the rest of the book, is written almost totally in Hebrew. Here is a translation.

Bass
The Songs of Solomon
Psalms, songs and hymns of praise
that have been composed according to the science of music
for three, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 voices
by the honored master Salamone Rossi, may his Rock
keep him and save him,
a resident of the holy congregation of Mantua,
to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing His most
exalted name on all
sacred occasions. New
in the land.
Here in Venice, 1622
at the command of their Lordships

Pietro and Lorenzo Bragadini
in the house of Giovanni Calleoni.
By the distinguished Lords
Pietro and Lorenzo Bragadini



Figure 1. Rossi. *Ha-Shirim, basso*, title page.

We can see on this title page some of the challenges of a bi-cultural identity. To describe what they were creating, the authors had to borrow or invent words that did not exist in the Hebrew language. The first word on the page is “*basso*,” the Italian word meaning bass, spelled out in Hebrew letters.¹⁶ There was no word for harmony or polyphony in Hebrew, so the authors used the Italian word “*musica*,” again spelled with Hebrew letters.

Indeed, the very concept of this book is predicated on both its authors’ and its readers’ ability to negotiate multiple identities. In these polyphonic motets the lyrics are in Hebrew, and the context is the synagogue worship service. But the musical styles, the convention of notation, the musical terminology, and the performative aspect are all borrowed from the culture of Christian Europe.

Rossi’s bilingual (or bi-directional) identity can be seen most strikingly in a page of music from the 1622 publication (figure 2). The musical notation is read from left to right; each word of the Hebrew lyrics, however, must be read from right to left. This manifestation of battling orthographies made for very complicated code switching.

Figure 2. Rossi, “*Keter*,” canto.

Code switching also occurs in several of the motets in which the choir would sing certain parts of the prayer in the new polyphonic Italian style, while other sections of the prayer would be chanted by the congregation or the cantor using the traditional monophonic modal melodies. In

accordance with the conventions of church music of his time, Rossi inserted double bar lines in the middle of a composition as a signal for the choir to pause while the cantor or the congregation sang the traditional chant. Figure 3 shows a few pages of the present author’s attempt to reconstruct a performance of Rossi’s “Keter,” the original of which is shown in figure 2.¹⁷ Rossi composed music for only a portion of the liturgical text, leaving the rest to be chanted by cantor and congregation in the traditional manner. [[Click here to listen to a recording of Rossi’s “Keter.”](#)]

The image displays a musical score for Rossi's "Keter," presented in two columns of staves. The left column contains vocal parts for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, with lyrics in Hebrew. The right column contains instrumental parts for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass, also with lyrics in Hebrew. The score is divided into measures, with measure numbers 10, 17, 22, 24, 27, 29, 34, and 37 indicated. The lyrics are: ke - ter yit - nu, ya - khad - ku - lam ke - du - sha le - kha - ye - sha - le - shu, ke - ma - she - ne - e - mar al yad ne - vi - e - kha, ve - ka - na - ze el ze - ve - a - mar, ka - dōsh ka - dōsh ka - dōsh a - dō - nai tse - va - ot, me - lo - khol ha - a - rets ke - vō - dō, lakh ha - mō - né ma - la im, ke - vō - dō ma - lé ó - lam, me - sha - re - tav shō - a - , ke - vō - dō ma - lé ó - lam, me - sha - re - tav shō - a - , ke - vō - dō ma - lé ó - lam, me - sha - re - tav shō - a - , ke - vō - dō ma - lé ó - lam, me - sha - re - tav shō - a - , ke - vu - tsé ma - ta, im ze la - ze: a - yé me - kōm ke - vō - dō, lim ze la - ze: a - yé me - kōm ke - vō - dō, ke - vu - tsé ma - ta, im ze la - ze: a - yé me - kōm ke - vō - dō.

Figure 3. Rossi, “Keter,” the author’s edition, first pages.

Other conventions of Italian polyphony can be found in *Ha-shirim*. Nine of the thirty-three motets are in the style of *cori spezzati*, a polychoral format in which singers are divided into two groups in physical opposition, singing at times in alternation, and at times together. This style is commonly associated with the Cathedral of San Marco in Venice, and was widespread in churches throughout Italy and beyond. Figure 4 shows the first pages of the present author’s edition of Rossi’s hymn, “*Eftakh Na Sefatai*” a7. [[Click here to listen to a recording of Rossi’s “Eftakh Na Sefatai.”](#)]

The image displays two pages of a musical score for Rossi's "Kaddish" canto. The score is written on ten staves per page, with Hebrew lyrics printed below the notes. The left page is headed "קדש" (Kaddish) and "אבינו קדוש" (Our Father, Holy). The right page is headed "המשקולית" (The Sanctus) and "כב" (Cantata). The lyrics on the left page include: "אמן ואמר כל ישראל כל ועל עלינו", "ישראל בית דכל ובעתהון יתחנן", "אמן ואמר רבשמיא אבותון קדם", "טובים ותיים שמיא", "אמן ואמר ישראל כל ועל עלינו", "עלינו שלום ועשה ברחמינו הוא בפרומנו שלום עשות", "אמן ואמר ישראל כל ועל". The lyrics on the right page include: "בעלמא רבא שמיא ותקדש ותגל", "ובוסתון בחיבון מלכותה ופליך כרעתה דברא", "קדיב ובסין בעלמא ישראל בית דכל וכחי", "אמן ואפרין", "ותרוסם ותפאר ויטהב ותכרד", "שמיא ותתלל ותתורר ותעלה ויתבשא", "הוא בריך דקורטא", "שורתא סבל ליעלא ליעלא", "בעלמא דאפרין ונתמא תעשרתא". At the bottom of the left page, the number "I 4 H 7" is printed.

Figure 5. Rossi, "Kaddish," canto.

The image displays two pages of a musical score for Rossi's "Kaddish". The score is arranged in two columns. The left column contains the vocal parts: soprano, quinto, alto, tenor, and bass. The right column contains the vocal parts: S, S2, A, T, and B. Each part is written on a staff with a treble or bass clef, a key signature of one flat, and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes. The lyrics are in Hebrew and English. The lyrics are: Yit - ga - dal ve - yit - ka - dash she - teih, be - cha - yei - chon uv - yo - mei - chon uv - cha - meih, ra - ba, be - ol - mah div - yey de - chol beyt Yis - ra - eil, ba - a - ra chir - 'u - teih, ve - yam - lich mal - chu - ga - la u - viz - man ka - riv, ve - im - ru a - men.

Figure 6, Rossi, "Kaddish," the author's edition, first pages.

Some of Rossi's melodies link him to his Christian contemporaries. The main theme of Rossi's "Elohim Hashivenu," displaying a rare retrospective point-of-imitation style, bears a strong resemblance to Orlando di Lasso's "Cum essem parvulus" (see figures 7 and 8). [\[Click here to listen to a recording of the Lasso excerpt.\]](#) [\[Click here to listen to a recording of the Rossi excerpt.\]](#) [\[Click here to listen to a recording of Rossi's "Elohim Hashivenu."\]](#)

Super flumina Lodovico Viadana

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Super flumina" by Lodovico Viadana. It consists of two systems. The first system has a bass line with the lyrics "Su - per flu - mi - na" and a piano accompaniment. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with a melisma on the word "mi".

Figure 10. Viadana, “*Super flumina*,” first phrase

We see similar word painting in the opening measures of Rossi’s setting of Psalm 121, in which he sets the superscription, “*Shir Lama’a lot*” – “A song of ascents.” The word “*shir*” (“song”) is given a beautiful cascading melisma, the longest in the entire motet. [\[Click here to listen to a recording of Rossi’s “*Shir Lama’alot*.”\]](#)

The image shows a musical score for the opening section of Rossi's "Shir Lama'alot". It features five vocal parts: soprano, alto, tenor, quinto, and bass. Each part has the lyrics "shir - lam - ma - a - - - lot". The soprano part has a long, cascading melisma on the word "shir".

Figure 11. Rossi, “*Shir Lama'alot*,” opening section, the author’s edition.

We do not know when Rossi died. There is no mention of him after 1628, when there was an outbreak of the plague in Mantua. In 1630 the ghetto was evacuated during the Austrian

invasion, and some of the residents relocated to Venice. Rabbi Leon Modena established a Jewish musical academy in Venice that functioned from 1628 until ca. 1638, but there is no mention of Salamone Rossi.

There is no evidence of any other collection of polyphonic synagogue music of the size and quality of *Ha-shirim Asher Lishlomo* until the nineteenth century. The musicologist Israel Adler discovered several isolated instances of art music that were performed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the synagogues of Venice, Siena, Casale Monferrato, Amsterdam, and Comtat Venaissin.¹⁸ These are delightful works, most of them composed by Christian musicians for special occasions, but none have either the depth or scope of Rossi's *Ha-shirim*.

The first reemergence of Rossi's music was the publication of a modern edition of *Ha-Shirim* in Paris in 1876.¹⁹ It was prepared by Samuel Naumbourg, Cantor of the Great Synagogue of Paris, with the assistance of his synagogue choir director Samuel David, and Vincent D'Indy, then still a young music student. Naumbourg wrote that he was perhaps the only person who possessed a complete set of the eight part books for the motets.²⁰ And he acknowledged what a challenge he faced in trying to decipher the old notation.²¹ Naumbourg chose modernization over historical accuracy. In accordance with nineteenth-century standards, he felt free to add his interpretations of tempo and dynamics, transpose to different keys, rearrange for different voice parts, alter rhythms, and even substitute different texts to accommodate the needs of his synagogue.

But his edition did instigate a revival and brought Rossi's music to a wider audience. In the twentieth century several new editions of *Ha-shirim* were published, for both scholars and performers, and numerous recordings were issued. The most significant scholarship on Rossi to date has come from musicologist Don Harrán, who authored an impressive monograph, and edited all of Rossi's music for the American Institute of Musicology's *Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae*.

From the perspective of four hundred years, we can appreciate Rossi's boldness in attempting to break a centuries-old musical tradition. And, more importantly, now that these motets are again available, we can appreciate them not merely for their historical interest, but also for their inherent beauty.

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Scholarly Editions

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Elohim Hashivenu (Psalm 80), New York: Transcontinental Publications, 1993.

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Portions of this monograph originally appeared in *The American Choral Review*, Yale University's *Institute of Sacred Music Colloquium: Music, Worship, Arts* Vol. 5, and *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music*. The author is grateful to the editors of these publications for their permission.

¹ In the preface to the publication Rossi provides this date on the Jewish calendar: “the first day of the month of Heshvan, 5383,” corresponding to October 5, 1622.

² In some synagogues the cantor would assemble a few singers to improvise a primitive harmonic accompaniment to his chanting. These singers, generally known as *meshorerim*, would hum drones, sing in parallel thirds or sixths with the cantor, and lead the congregation in appropriate responses.

³ Modena’s fame is due in part to the publication of his autobiography, *Life of Judah*.

⁴ Some musicologists think that Rossi chose to publish nineteen compositions because he was nineteen years old, and if so he would have been born nineteen years before 1589. Don Harrán, *Salamone Rossi: A Jewish Musician in Late Renaissance Mantua* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.

⁵ Don Harran, “Salamone Rossi as a Composer of Theater Music,” *Studi Musicali*, 16 (1987): 130.

⁶ Rossi’s sonatas were published in 1613, Marini’s in 1617.

⁷ Rossi’s madrigals with continuo were published in 1600, Monteverdi’s in 1605 (book five).

⁸ The practice of accompanying solo songs with lute was common enough at the time, but Rossi’s *Libro primo* may have been the first publication in Italy of through-composed madrigals with an original lute tablature.

⁹ Claudio Monteverdi, *Il quinto libro de madrigali a cinque voci*, 1605.

¹⁰ Joel Newman and Fritz Rikko, *A Thematic Index to the Works of Salamon Rossi* (Hackensack, 1972), 26, 36, 52.

¹¹ The fact that *I bei ligustri e rose* and *Donna il vostro bel viso* are the only two “Ayeres” with Italian texts in Weelkes’ collection strongly suggests that they came from a common source. Such borrowing was not unusual in this period. It is generally known that Thomas Morley (an older colleague of Weelkes) pirated the *balletti* of Giovanni Gastoldi (an older colleague of Rossi at Mantua). Perhaps the best known of Morley’s “borrowings” is his *Sing We and Chant It*, based on Gastoldi’s *A lieta vita*.

¹² The first ghetto was established in nearby Venice in 1516. Mantua did not legislate a closed area for Jews until 1610. However, the Jews of Mantua had already been living in their own enclave for many years. Donald Sanders, *Music at the Gonzaga Court in Mantua*, (Lanham, Massachusetts: Lexington Books), 109.

¹³ But there is an interesting note written by Rabbi Modena in 1605 that refers to an ensemble comprising only adult men. “There are in our midst six or eight men learned in song, by which I mean music [“*musica*”—i.e. in the Italian sense], men of our community (may their Rock keep and save them), who on holidays and festivals raise their voices in the synagogue with songs of praise and hymns and melodies—such as *Ein Keloheinu*, *Aleinu Leshabeah*, *Yigdal*, *Adon Olam*, and the like—for honoring the Lord in an orderly relationship of the voices [i.e. polyphony] in accordance with aforementioned science [i.e. harmony].” Cited in Don Harrán, *Salamone Rossi, Complete Works* (volume 13a) (Middleton, Wisconsin: American Institute of Musicology, 2003), 193.

¹⁴ In the realm of church music, homophony had its place for short contrasting sections within larger polyphonic works, in the *falsobordone* psalm tones and in shorter (or less elaborate) mass settings.

¹⁵ Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance* (New York, 1954), 449.

¹⁶ Each part-book begins with the name of its voice part, transliterated and spelled in Hebrew characters: *canto, alto, tenore, basso, quinto, sesto, setto, ottavo*.

¹⁷ The traditional chants are taken from Elio Piatelli, *Canti liturgici ebraici de rito italiano* (Rome: Edizioni De Santis, 1967).

¹⁸ Israel Adler, *La pratique musicale savante dans quelques communautés juives en Europe aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1966). Some of the scores have been published by the Jewish Music Research Centre at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and I have edited several of them in performing editions for American choruses.

¹⁹ Samuel Naumbourg, *Cantiques de Salomon Rossi*. (Paris: n.p., 1876). Reprint edition (New York: Sacred Music Press, 1954).

²⁰ Peut-être suis-je le seul qui possède aujourd’hui au complet le recueil des chants sacrés de Rossi. Naumbourg, *Cantiques de Salomon Rossi*, 12.

²¹ Je pourrais ... faire valoir les difficultés que j’ai eu à surmonter, les obstacles qu’il m’a fallu vaincre et les veilles que m’a coûtées mon travail. Naumbourg, *Cantiques de Salomon Rossi*, 19.