Sharing the Breadth and Beauty of Jewish Choral Music

Don Lee | June 24, 2019

The Zamir Chorale of Boston is launching a new online resource intended to share the breadth and beauty of the repertoire that has been its specialty for 50 years. The chorale's founder, Joshua Jacobson, explains why he believes choral music from Jewish traditions will be a welcome discovery for choruses of all kinds.

Adam Reinwald knew that any choice he made would require his singers to enter unfamiliar territory. For the National Lutheran Choir (NLC) in Minneapolis, he was planning a March 2018 concert representing the importance of prayer in three faith traditions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Reinwald says the program, titled "Call to Prayer," was the first time the NLC stepped into "a different faith space." The main obstacle he faced in preparing for the concert was "finding pieces that fit this choir, which is a high-level community chorus. So some of the pieces needed to still have sounds that they were used to." He enjoyed researching Jewish and Arabic music traditions and found expert collaborators in the Twin Cities, including a Jewish hazzan (cantor) and a Palestinian instrumentalist," but he says it was "a little bit of a challenge."

A new project from the Zamir Chorale of Boston aims to help Reinwald and choral leaders like him solve this kind of challenge more easily. In June, the chorale plans to launch JewishChoralMusic.com, an online, searchable database of hundreds of choral works that come out of Jewish traditions, both sacred and secular. Conductors like Reinwald will have plenty to choose from, says Zamir founder and director Joshua Jacobson—including a good deal of music that a typical community chorus would immediately feel comfortable with. Although some of the repertoire "does sound ethnic, whether it's the Middle Eastern modes or the rhythms or the Yiddish sound," Jacobson emphasizes that the database will also guide users to names such as Louis Lewandowski (1821-94), a Polish-German composer whose music for the synagogue "sounds a lot like the music of Mendelssohn, and that is music that can be easily related to by anybody who loves great 19th-century choral music," Jacobson says. Jewish secular music to be represented in the database includes choral arrangements of traditional folk songs, popular songs, theater music, and communal songs, as well as Jewish-themed compositions intended for concert performance.

The Historic Place of Jewish Liturgical Music

Mindful of the Zamir Chorale's legacy as it marks its 50th anniversary, Jacobson and his organization are launching the database because "we want more conductors, more choruses, to be aware of the repertoire of choral music from Jewish traditions." In particular, Jacobson is campaigning right now for "the 19th-century synagogue classics," along with the work of an earlier composer whose name Baroque specialists will recognize: Salamone Rossi. Rossi was an Italian musician whose output includes a collection of 33 motets for the synagogue, published in 1622. According to Jacobson, "if you didn't hear the Hebrew lyrics, or didn't know the context of the synagogue, you would not be able to tell that this is music different from that of Orlando di Lasso."

But in the history of Jewish liturgical music, Rossi was an outlier. The genre's real beginnings came much later, says Jacobson, at the beginning of the 19th century, "with the post-Napoleonic emancipation of Jews from the ghetto and a greater interaction with a wider culture." Prior to that time, says Jacobson, the liturgy of a traditional Jewish service consisted of the cantor leading the worshippers in heterophonic chanting, as well as hymns sung in unison. Instrumental accompaniment was forbidden. When choirs were introduced, reaction was mixed. "There were many people who thought, 'This is a beautification of the music of the service. It's a wonderful way for us to reach God, to have a spiritual experience through this aesthetic experience,'" Jacobson says, while others resisted the departure from the traditional mode of prayer, and some considered it heresy. Although cantors continued to sing the solo modal chants, by the early 19th century Jacobson says some were being trained in the bel canto tradition of vocal production.

In those days, Jacobson says "one would have heard, certainly in the Reform synagogues, some really fine compositions by the great composers of Jewish liturgical music." One of them was Salomon Sulzer, an Austrian contemporary of Franz Schubert, who composed "a wonderful collection of choral music, as well as solo music for the synagogues." Along with Sulzer in Vienna and Lewandowski, who was active in Berlin, Jacobson points to Samuel Naumbourg (1817-80) in Paris and David Novakovski (1848-1921) in Odessa as "first-rate." In the 20th century, composers such as Kurt Weill, Ernest Bloch, Darius Milhaud, and Leonard Bernstein picked up the mantle. It was in a synagogue that Bernstein first heard classical music, Jacobson notes. Bernstein once wrote that he never forgot "the tremendous influence" of Solomon Braslavsky, the cantor (and composer) who served the Bernstein family's congregation. The tradition has continued into the 21st century, although Jacobson laments that the emphasis these days in synagogues, as in many churches, is turning toward "singalong melodies that are deadly simple."

What JewishChoralMusic.com Will Do

If Jacobson's experience is any indication, the impetus that drives many conductors to try out JewishChoralMusic.com will be a phenomenon he calls "the December dilemma." That month seems to be the time people think of Jewish choral music, Jacobson says, because conductors feel pressure to program alternatives to Christian music, "so they look in a catalog and the first stupid dreidel song that they find is what ends up on the program." The result, he observes, is that Jewish repertoire is most prominent at Hanukkah—a sore subject with him because, for one thing, Hanukkah music is probably "not going to be at the same level as the great Christmas music, in part because Hanukkah has always been a minor holiday on the Jewish calendar."

The new online database may provide better answers for the December dilemma by featuring repertoire recommendations categorized according to theme, including music for Hanukkah. But Jacobson's larger point is that "we don't need an occasion to program Jewish choral music, just as we might perform a Mozart *Requiem* any time of the year. A concert of Psalms could easily include music by Rossi and Lewandowski, not because they are Jewish but because the music is lovely." He believes the music represented in the database can be regarded as integral to Western choral repertoire in every respect. It includes "classics that should be sung by every chorus," Jacobson says, "not just the Jewish choirs or the synagogue choirs." When he says "every chorus," he means it. "I'll make sure that we find something that is at an appropriate level of difficulty for you," he says. "If you are conducting a conservatory chorus, I'll show you more challenging pieces by Schoenberg, for example. If you're looking for something that's going to be an audience-pleaser, certainly everyone can relate to these 19th-century pieces."

As a self-described "repertoire nerd," Adam Reinwald is excited to dive into JewishChoralMusic.com. "I think the idea is absolutely fantastic," he says. "Here in the Midwest, especially in Minnesota, there is a such a strong connection to the Lutheran college choral tradition that oftentimes works at the exclusion of music like that which will be featured in in Dr. Jacobson's database. I think that this will hopefully open up a new avenue to that music." Conductor and Boston University music professor André de Quadros calls his friend Joshua Jacobson a "formidable scholar of Jewish choral music" and believes he is almost uniquely qualified to undertake a project like this. "What Joshua has done is to combine both the scholarly and the performance in a way I think nobody else has quite done in this country." De Quadros feels the database will be "enormously helpful," not just for non-Jewish choruses but also for Jacobson's Jewish colleagues in Israel.

Joshua Jacobson Is on a Mission

Jacobson grew up in a traditional Jewish household and his family often went to synagogue, but that's not where he discovered his life's calling. His first memory of Jewish choral music comes from a Jewish summer camp in the early '60s, when he was about 14. A new music counselor formed a "fabulous" choir and Jacobson was hooked. "I said, 'That's what I want to do when I grow up.'" Since then, he's been investigating, arranging, editing, publishing, and performing this repertoire, much of which is little-known even in the Jewish community. He's become a man with a mission to bring the hidden jewels of this repertoire to light.

Jacobson believes the reasons his love for this music is not more widely shared stem from the origins of choral music itself: in the Christian church and traditions that extended from it. "There was just so little liturgical contact between Jews and Christians, or if there was, it was more of a one-way street, with Jews coming in and hearing the music of the church." Today, candidates for master's degrees in choral conducting are taught the historic Christian literature, Jacobson notes, but learn nothing about the "dozens if not hundreds of compositions by the composers for the big, great synagogues of Europe in the 19th century. And this music, I think, can stand alongside that of their Christian contemporaries." When composers are not well known, publishers, naturally, are far less likely to put their music on the market. "So it becomes a vicious cycle, one that we have to break," Jacobson says. "Somehow."

Jacobson's strategy includes creating his own editions of these 19th-century pieces for his own chorus to perform, in some cases self-publishing "to get them out there, not to make money." To publicize the new database, he'll be writing articles for trade journals and taking out ads, reaching out to choral faculty at major music schools with flyers and offers to appear as a guest lecturer, and including website plugs in the Zamir Chorale's YouTube videos. In the choral field today, he senses there is an appetite for what he has to offer. His experiences at gatherings such as the recent ACDA Conference in Kansas City tell him "conductors across America are looking for something different. Especially for a convention among their peers, they don't want to just do another performance of Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*."

Interfaith Concerts Create New Channels

Reinwald senses Jacobson's online efforts could help to open the door to more interfaith events like the National Lutheran Choir's "Call to Prayer." He says "finding value in various sources of music to tell one story" was the basis for his experience prior to joining the NLC in 2014 as assistant conductor, adding the title community engagement manager in 2016. For 17 years he sang with Cantus and served on its artistic panel for programming. Working with music that is outside, but related to, its tradition helps to give the NLC a pathway forward, he says. "Interfaith programming is, I think, a clear representation of where our community as a whole is going in this broader, more globalized society."

This past March, Jacobson and de Quadros collaborated in "Voices of Freedom," an interfaith choral concert in Boston, with the Zamir Chorale representing Jewish traditions and de Quadros's chamber choir, VOICES 21C, singing songs from Islamic cultures. Representing Christian traditions in the concert was the Boston Community Gospel Choir. Although VOICES 21C's members are non-Muslims, the group performs Muslim repertoire as part of its mission to promote global understanding through music. De Quadros has found interfaith experiences such as this one to be inspirational because he sees music as an effective channel to understand other cultures. "In the face of rising hate, we need to build a much more all-embracing society," he says, "and one way to come closer to Jewish people, Muslims, and other victims of hate crimes is by understanding their music."

In light of increasing sensitivity to matters of cultural appropriation (https://www.chorusamerica.org/article/cultural-appropriation-culture-stealing-culture-sharing), how much of that understanding will be necessary for a non-Jewish chorus preparing a piece found in JewishChoralMusic.com? There's no need to study "Judaism 101," says de Quadros, and Jacobson would agree, but he says there are issues to watch for. One of them is ghettoizing or pigeonholing the music. While he is committed to the social purpose of events like "Voices of Freedom" and welcomes the attention they bring to Jewish music, he would be disappointed if interfaith concerts were the only outlet for Jewish liturgical music. He points out that we don't hear Mendelssohn motets only in church or interfaith contexts; they show up in regular concert programs as well. In a related vein, he remembers a performance that included a Rossi Psalm setting. "I was very happy that the director used my edition, and they did a great performance," but he was not happy to see the piece used in a concert of "ethnic" music. Although Rossi set a Hebrew text, "there's nothing inherent in the music that makes it sound uniquely Jewish," Jacobson says.

On the other hand, Jacobson acknowledges that certain Jewish liturgical pieces require special attention when being considered for the concert hall. He notes that some Jewish singers and audience members who are scrupulous in the observance of the Third Commandment avoid taking the name of God "in vain." They may be offended to hear the decontextualization and secularization of a liturgical text that is normally linked exclusively to a particular occasion or function. But, he says, one can easily apply an appropriate euphemism to substitute for the name of God. Jacobson says JewishChoralMusic.com will provide guidance on such questions, but he adds that they will arise only in "a very, very small percentage of the music that we're recommending."

In his experience with interfaith programming, Reinwald has learned that guidance from authentic representatives of other traditions "is completely necessary to giving a faithful performance." In preparing Islamic music for "Call to Prayer, he says, the NLC "did enough learning and enough discussing and enough inviting people in to help coach us that it did feel like a faithful representation." De Quadros would agree with that goal. With VOICES 21C, he says they talk a lot about the role they assume in concerts like "Voices of Freedom." While they could not be "engaged, ritually and prayerfully," in the music in precisely the way Muslims would be, his chorus could authentically approach the performance as "a spiritual engagement with another tradition, but in a respectful way—not as in, 'I'm a Muslim,' but 'I am a citizen of the world and I'm engaging with you spiritually as my Muslim brother and sister.'"

Proselytizing, Joshua Jacobson points out, is not part of Jewish tradition. If he has become a champion of Jewish choral music, it has more to do with ethnic pride than winning converts, he says. To borrow from the Zamir Chorale mission statement, it's "the breadth and beauty of Jewish culture" that have led him to his life's work. He remembers an old ad campaign for a Brooklyn bakery that featured the tagline, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's Real Jewish Rye." He would make the same argument for choral music from Jewish traditions. "I'm not trying to convert anybody, and I'm not trying to say, 'Don't do Mozart, don't do Beethoven.' But, you know, there's room for rye bread as well as white bread. Or pita."

Don Lee is the managing editor of the Voice, as well as a media producer, editor, writer, and amateur choral singer who lives in St. Paul, Minnesota. At NPR in Washington DC, he was the executive producer of Performance Today.

Tags:
Advocacy (/category/newwebsite/advocacy), Community Engagement (/category/newwebsite/community-engagement), Diversity/Equity/Inclusion (/category/newwebsite/diversityequityinclusion), History (/category/newwebsite/history), Repertoire (/category/newwebsite/repertoire), Tool (/category/newwebsite/tool)