

Singing in Hebrew

Joshua R. Jacobson



Choral programming has certainly evolved over the last fifty years. Conductors today are more aware of musical traditions other than those of the European masters of the common practice period. But many conductors are only dimly aware of music arising out of Jewish traditions, other than a few “dreidel” songs for Chanukah, and, of course, Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms*.

There is indeed a wealth of such music, much of it “non-idiomatic”—that is to say, there is nothing inherent in the notes themselves that announces, “I am Jewish.” The repertoire is certainly not as vast as that of Christian Europe, but it includes liturgical and concert gems from the early seventeenth century to contemporary times. Following are just a few recommended works by some of the significant composers of this repertoire. For more information on these and other recommended works (including lists for SSA choirs, TTB choirs, and young singers), the reader is encouraged to visit www.jewishchoralmusic.com.

- Paul Ben-Haim (Israeli, 1897-1984). *Romi Akarah* is an a cappella secular motet based on the prophecies of Isaiah. *Kabbalat Shabbat* is a setting of the Friday night service for choir and chamber orchestra.
- Leonard Bernstein (American, 1918-1990). *Chichester Psalms* is his most well-known major work for chorus and orchestra. *Hashkivenu* for choir, cantor, and organ is from the evening liturgy with many of the typical Bernsteinian characteristics.
- Ernest Bloch (Swiss American, 1880-1959). Bloch’s hour-long *Sacred Service* for choir, baritone, and large orchestra is the most magnificent setting of the synagogue liturgy. As he was composing, Bloch declared that *Sacred Service* was no longer just liturgical music; it had become a cosmic oratorio.
- Yehezkel Braun (Israeli, 1922-2014). *Shir Hashirim* is an a cappella secular motet based on the third chapter of the Song of Songs. The music betrays the composer’s interests in both Gregorian Chant and


Middle Eastern styles.

- Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco (Italian American, 1895-1968). *Baruch Ha-ba* was composed for choir and organ (or piano) for a wedding ceremony. The lyrics are from Psalm 118.
- Jacques Halévy (French, 1799-1862). *Min Ha-métsar* (Psalm 118) was allegedly composed for the Festival service in his father’s synagogue. Immersed in the style of French opera, it is scored for SATB choir, soloists, and optional organ.
- Ken Lampl (American, b. 1964). The composer has a number of stunning Zen-like works for a cappella chorus, among them *Adon Olam* and *Dirshu*.
- David Lang (American, b. 1957). Lang’s *I Lie* is a minimalist setting of a Yiddish love poem for SSA chorus.
- Louis Lewandowski (German, 1821-1894). Arguably the greatest composer of nineteenth-century synagogue choral music, written in

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a Mendelssohnian style. Among his greatest are Psalm 150 (*Halleluyah*—in Hebrew) and Psalm 36 (*Ewiger*—in German).

- Darius Milhaud (French American, 1892-1974). He wrote a charming setting of the Sabbath liturgy, *Service Sacré*, for choir, cantor, and chamber orchestra.
- Salamone Rossi (Italian, c. 1570-c. 1630). Rossi was the first person to compose synagogue motets in Hebrew in the style of the early Italian Baroque. There are 33 motets in the published collection; you could start with Psalm 146.
- Arnold Schoenberg (Austrian American, 1874-1951). Among his works with Jewish content are *Köl Nidre* for choir and narrator and large orchestra, and *De Profundis*, a challenging dodecaphonic setting of Psalm 130 in Hebrew for chorus a cappella.
- Robert Starer (Austrian American, 1924-2001). The composer has numerous vocal works based on the Bible and with Hebrew texts. *Ariel: Visions of Isaiah* is a dramatic cantata for chorus and orchestra. *Psalms of Woe and Joy* is an expressive two-movement work for choir and piano.
- Kurt Weill (German American, 1900-1950). Best known for his satiric musical theater masterpieces, his bluesy setting of the Sabbath *Kiddush* (sanctification over the wine), for chorus and soloist and piano (or organ), was dedicated to his father, who had been the chief cantor of Dessau.
- Stephan Wolpe (German American, 1902-1972). During and after a short sojourn in Israel, Wolpe composed several vocal works in Hebrew that are much more accessible than his instrumental music. His setting of Psalm 122, *Samacht*, is for a cappella chorus, *divisi*.



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- Yehudi Wyner (American, b. 1929). His *Shir Hashirim* (scored for either mixed or treble chorus a cappella), is based on a Georgian tradition for chanting the Song of Songs. Wyner is the son of the great Jewish composer, Lazar Weiner.

We should also mention several non-Jewish composers who have written music with Hebrew texts:

- Karl Jenkins (Welsh, b. 1944). *Tehillim* is the third movement of Jenkins's oratorio, *Gloria*. Called "The Psalm," it is Psalm 150 sung in Hebrew.

- Nick Page (American, b. 1952). *L'eyla*, scored for SAATB chorus, keyboard, and percussion, incorporates the South African mbube style into a rousing setting of the inspirational words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Cook.

- Alice Parker (American, b. 1925). Parker composed *An American Kedushah* for a commission from the American Guild of Organists. It is a ten-minute setting for a cappella choir and two soloists in Hebrew and English of the synagogue sanctification trope (similar to the Latin Sanctus).

- Franz Schubert (Austrian, 1797-1828). The great Viennese Cantor Salomon Sulzer commissioned Schubert to compose a setting in Hebrew of the Sabbath Psalm (92). His *Tov Lehodos*

Pronunciation Guide for Singing in Hebrew

Use the standard rules for Italian pronunciation. Any syllable beginning with a vowel should begin with a glottal plosive.

And note:

ay (sometimes ai) = [a:i], as in why

e = open [ɛ] as in bed

é = closed [e] as in passé

i = open [ɪ] as in bit

í = closed [i] as in beet

h = [h] as in head (At the end of most syllables "h" is silent.)

o = open [ɔ], as in cough

ó = closed [o], as in most (but no diphthong)

g = [g] (always hard), as in get

k = [k], as in kid

kh (sometimes ch) = [x], as in the German Bach, or the Scottish "loch"

r = [r], always flipped, as in the British "very, very"

s = [s] (unvoiced), as in sail

sh = [ʃ] as in shall

ts (sometimes tz) = as in Betsy

z = as in zoo

A word of caution. When using an edition published in a non-English speaking country, one will find a different system of transliteration. For example, in a German edition one might find "Mah Tovv" written as "Mah Towu," or "Tsadik" written as "Zadik," or "Yom" written as "Jom."

Recommended Resources

Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire, Volume 4: Hebrew Texts by Ethan Nash and Joshua Jacobson (earthsongs, 2009)

The website JewishChoralMusic.com features an annotated data base of compositions, a podcast course on the nature and history of choral music from Jewish traditions, sample recordings and scores, a bibliography, and lists of recommended music for specific occasions, such as Chanukah or a Holocaust Memorial.

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is scored for SATB choir, solo quartet, and baritone cantor, a cappella (although it can be performed with organ doubling).

- Eric Whitacre (American, b. 1970). *Five Hebrew Love Songs* is based on poems by Hila Plittman. The ten-minute work is scored for SATB (or SSA) with piano and violin (or string ensemble).

Some conductors may be concerned about issues of cultural appropriation. For example, is it appropriate for a Christian to perform Jewish sacred music in a secular context? In most cases, the answer is a resounding yes. First of all, many composers have set sacred texts with no intention of them being used liturgically; their compositions were intended for concert use. Further, many liturgical works can be re-contextualized and performed on a concert stage. The one issue of sensitivity is the pronunciation of God's name. For many observant Jews, singing the name of God as Adónai in a concert or anywhere outside of a prayer service is considered to be a violation of the third commandment of the Decalogue, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." Therefore, in concert performances, it is common practice among observant Jews (or when the audience includes observant Jews) to avoid singing the word *Adónai*. Some choral singers substitute *Adómai* or *Adónam*.


A Living Language

Hebrew was the language of ancient Israel until around the year 200 of the common era. For centuries it survived only as the language of Jewish prayer and scholarship. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a conscious effort was made to revive spoken Hebrew, and now it is once again a living language in the modern state of Israel.

Hebrew is written with twenty-two characters, Semitic in form, rather than Roman. The phonemes of modern Hebrew are not all that different from ours, with the exception of guttural consonants that resemble the German "ch," and the "r," which is flipped. Like Arabic, Hebrew is written from right to left, definitely a challenge for musicians using standard Western staff notation. Fortunately, in most sheet music Hebrew lyrics are written in transliteration, using the Roman alphabet.

As with most languages, there are regional variations in the pronunciation of Hebrew. The most common pronunciations today are Ashkenazic and Sephardic. "Ashkenazic" refers to modalities that had been used by Jews in Northern Europe. The term "Sephardic" is used to designate a pronunciation associated with Spanish Jews that developed in Israel. Sephardic Hebrew is used today in vernacular speech, as well as for liturgical Hebrew in most synagogues (other than ultra-Orthodox) around the world. From a practical point of view, the conductor approaching a score with transliterated Hebrew need not be concerned about these variations. Presumably

the composer or the editor has presented the phonemes of one or the other of these two styles. But those who are careful about HIPP (historically informed performance practice) may want to do a little research to ascertain whether the edition they are using actually reflects the sound of the language as it was heard by the original composer. For example, the current edition of Kurt Weill's *Kiddush* uses the Sephardic pronunciation, while the original publication uses the Ashkenazic.

Perhaps the biggest challenge in learning how to pronounce Hebrew is the fact that there is no single, universally used or accepted transliteration system. earthsong's publication, *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire, Volume 4: Hebrew Texts* provides IPA transcriptions as well as analyses of many of the most frequently performed choral works in Hebrew. A compact disc recording of pronunciation is included. Over the years I have developed a system of transliteration that works quite well with American singers. It is reproduced in the sidebar on page 61. 

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