**What is Jewish Choral Music?**

Like most musicologists who deal with this subject, wherever possible, I avoid using the term, “Jewish Music.” Music can’t be Jewish; only people can be Jewish. I prefer the expression, “Music of the Jewish People.” (But for convenience sake, we’ll continue to use the term, “Jewish Music.”) Under that category we would find music that has been “used” by Jews more than by other people, and so has come to be associated with the Jewish People. We could also include music that was created for use in Jewish worship services or other Jewish ceremonies. A setting of a text that is Jewish. A setting of a text that was written in a Jewish language, such as Hebrew or Aramaic or Yiddish or Ladino. Music composed with the specific purpose of evoking a Jewish association, such as the sound track from the film, *Schindler’s List*.

A Jewish composer’s religious affiliation does not automatically mean that everything he or she has composed is Jewish music. Leonard Bernstein’s *Missa Brevis* should not be considered “Jewish Music,” even though the composer was Jewish. Franz Schubert’s setting of Psalm 92 in Hebrew composed for Vienna’s Seitenstettengasse synagogue could be considered Jewish Music, even though Schubert was not. Handel’s oratorio, *Judas Maccabaeus*, was composed based on a story about Jewish national resistance in the second century b.c.e., so, in a sense it could be considered Jewish Music, even though that was not the intent of the composer. (Although Handel’s choice of the subjects for his oratorios seems to have had some connection with his desire to have tickets purchased by London’s Jews.)

Another reason why musicologists resist the nomenclature “Jewish Music” is the fact that there are so many different Jewish musics, reflecting the wide diversity of Jewish cultures. The synagogue music of the Jews of Yemen doesn’t have much in common with that of the Jews of Germany. Most of the music in an America Reform synagogue sounds quite different from that in an American Orthodox synagogue. There may not be much in common between a traditional folksong of Spanish Jews and that of Russian Jews.

There are several reasons why this repertoire remains in the shadows, why it is not well known (or known at all) by most choral conductors. First of all, there is the language challenge. Most conductors and their singers are not familiar with Jewish languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, Ladino, etc.), transliteration systems are awkward and inconsistent, and a language coach may be hard to find (although there are also Jewish choral works in English, French, Russian, etc.). Much of this music is unpublished, or is hard to spot in a publisher’s catalogue. This repertoire is by and large not to be found in choral anthologies, in the curriculum of choral lit classes, or in programming at conventions or all-state festivals. There has been no central source for this repertoire. Which is why, in its 50th year, the Zamir Chorale of Boston embarked on a mission to make this repertoire better known to all conductors. There are many awesome pieces: the early Baroque motets of the Mantuan composer Salamone Rossi; majestic music from the great synagogues of 19th century Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London, and Odessa; Jewish music by well-known composers such as Franz Schubert, Jacques Halévy, Modest Mussorgsky, Arnold Schoenberg, Darius Milhaud, Kurt Weill, William Grant Still, and so many more. There are also choral arrangements of folk songs, popular songs, and theater songs. Both light and serious, both easy and challenging, both folkloristic and classic.