

HALLELUJAH!

Timothy W. Sharp, editor

Editor's Note: The following article is contributed by Joshua R. Jacobson, one of the foremost authorities on Jewish choral music. He is Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at Northeastern University and Adjunct Professor of Jewish Music at Hebrew College, Brookline, Massachusetts. He is also founder and director of the Zamir Chorale of Boston. Jacobson is past President of the Massachusetts chapter of the American Choral Directors Association.

What Is Jewish Liturgical Music?

Music in Ancient Israel

MUSIC HAS always played an indispensable role in Jewish worship. Three thousand years ago, when King David brought the Holy Ark to Jerusalem, establishing that city as the political and spiritual capital of Israel, he arranged a musical celebration led by the Levite family singers and players.

David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their relatives as singers to sing joyful songs accompanied by musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals. . . . So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant with shouts, with the sounding of rams' horns, trumpets, and cymbals, and with the playing of lyres and harps. (1Chr. 15:16, 28)

After the Sanctuary (Bet HaMikdash in Hebrew) was built in Jerusalem during the reign of King Solomon (c. 1004 b.c.e.), music was an integral and impressive part of its ceremonies. There was a large orchestra consisting of multiple harps, lyres, flutes, trumpets, and cymbals, as well as an all-male chorus.¹

The Sanctuary was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 b.c.e. The Levite musicians, exiled from Jerusalem and impris-

oned in Babylon, were asked to entertain their captors with sacred music from the Sanctuary. They wrote of this experience:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. By the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors, our tormentors, demanded gleeful song, "Sing us some of your songs from Zion." But how could we sing the Lord's song on foreign soil? (Psalm 137: 1-4)

Music in the Synagogue

A new form of worship service developed in the Babylonian exile. Sessions of study and prayer in meeting houses (called synagogos in Greek or bet kenesset in Hebrew) took the place of the Sanctuary ritual.² For nearly two thousand years, the service in the synagogue has comprised the following elements.

1. Cantillation

At some services, a soloist known as the ba'al keriya, the master of the reading, chants a pericope from the Bible. The

Pentateuch (comprising Genesis through Deuteronomy) is divided into small portions so that the entire book is read consecutively in the course of a year. Appropriate readings from the Prophets and the Hagiographa may be chanted, as well. This scriptural chant, called "cantillation," has the following characteristics:

All texts are chanted, never spoken.

The performer is usually a male soloist. (Only recently have women been permitted to read in some congregations.)

There is no harmony or any form of accompaniment.

The scales most commonly used are the dorian, aeolian, mixolydian and pentatonic.³

There is no fixed meter; the rhythms are logogenic, flowing freely from the natural accents of the lyrics.

The selection of the mode is determined by the liturgical occasion. In other words, one set of melodic motifs is utilized for reading the Torah (Pentateuch) on weekdays, Sabbaths, and holidays, another set for reading the Torah on High Holy Days, another for reading the Haftarah (a selection from the Prophets)

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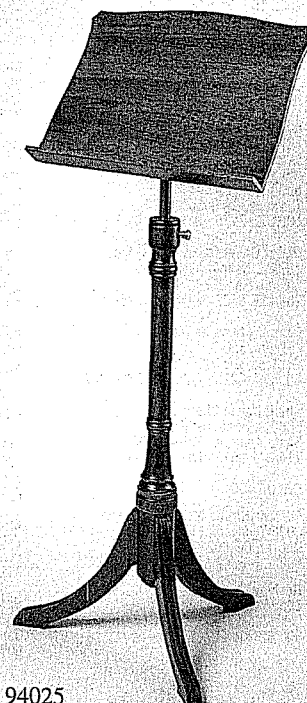
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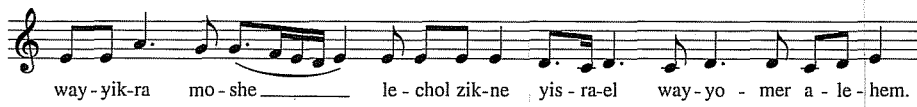


Figure 1a. Iraqi Jewish cantillation of Exodus 12:21.

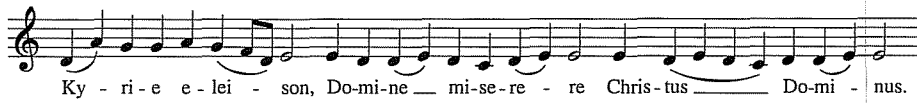


Figure 1b. Kyrie Eleison (third tone, Gregorian).

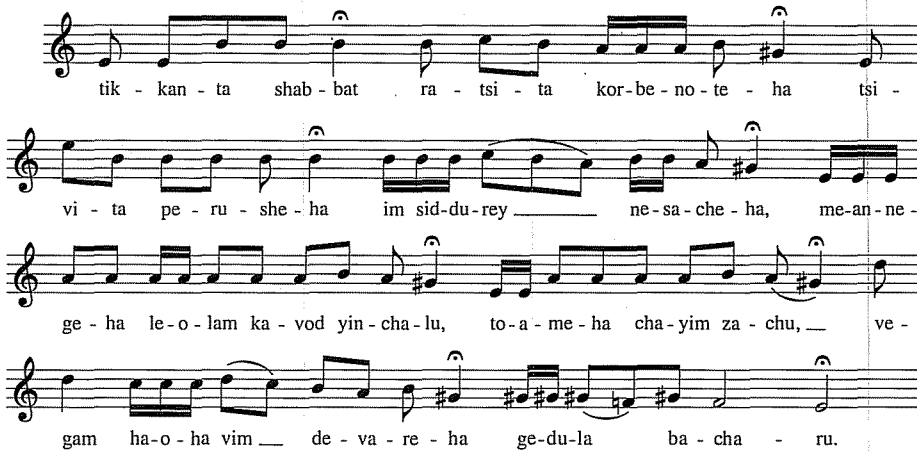


Figure 2. "Tikkanta Shabbat"

on Sabbaths and holidays, another for reading the Song of Songs on Passover, Ruth on Pentecost, and Ecclesiastes on Tabernacles, another for reading Esther on Purim, and yet another for reading Lamentations on the Tish'a Be'Av fast.

One hundred years ago, the musicologist Abraham Z. Idelsohn embarked on a comprehensive study of cantillation practices from a variety of Jewish traditions. Eric Werner extended Idelsohn's study, concentrating on a comparison of Jewish and Christian chants. Both studies showed a remarkable similarity among all these traditions. The most plausible explanation for this similarity is that many of these chants share a common origin in ancient Jerusalem. Figure 1 shows a comparison of two chant fragments, one Jewish⁴ and the other Gregorian⁵ (figures 1a and 1b).

The practice of cantillation is noted several times in the Christian Bible. Acts 15:21 describes the cantillation of the Torah: "For [the Pentateuch of] Moses has been read⁶ in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." Luke 4:16–20 offers this

description of the cantillation of the Haftarah:

He [Jesus] went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written [Isaiah 61:1–2]: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.

2. Prayers

In each service the ancient prayers are chanted by the entire congregation, led by a soloist called the hazzan or cantor. The resultant sound is often a voluminous, uncoordinated heterophony. The

characteristics of the prayer modes are similar in many respects to those of cantillation. All texts are chanted, never spoken. The performer is a male soloist (recently women have begun leading the prayers in some congregations).

There is usually no harmony or any form of accompaniment. However, in medieval Europe a practice arose in which the cantor would be accompanied by two "meshorerim"—a boy soprano and a bass who would improvise drones and antiphonal responses.

The scales used most often are the dorian, aeolian, mixolydian and pentatonic, as well as the "freygish," a form of the phrygian mode with a raised third, creating an augmented second between the second and third degrees.⁷ There is no fixed meter and no system of notation. The soloist is expected to improvise based on the appropriate set of motifs.

The selection of the mode ("nusach," in Hebrew) and its associated motifs is determined by the liturgical occasion. The cantor is expected to know which mode to use at each service. Thus, a knowledgeable congregant could know the holiday and time of day from listening to the melody. A fragment of the Ashkenazic (Northern European) chant for the Sabbath morning "Musaf" prayer is shown in figure 2.

3. Hymns

The texts and music for the cantillation of the Biblical pericope and the chanting of the prayers are quite ancient; many of them are more than two thousand years old. Of more recent vintage, dating from the medieval period, is a repertoire of hymns chanted in unison by the congregation. The lyrics of these hymns, reflecting the influence of Arabic poetry, are often cast in a fixed meter, such as iambic tetrameter. The music for these hymns tends to be more Western sounding, with a rigid triple or quadruple meter, evenly balanced phrases, and tonal cadences. Not all the music heard in the synagogue is ancient Hebrew chant. Throughout the centuries, many gentile melodies have made their way into the synagogue service. For example, the well-known melody for the Hanukah hymn *Máoz Tsur* was derived from an old German love song. Figure 3 shows a nineteenth-cen-

tury melody by the Russian cantor Eliezer Gerowich for the hymn text, *Adon Olam* (Master of the World), written by eleventh-century poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol.

4. Sermon

In some synagogues a sermon may be delivered by one of the members or by the rabbi. Rabbi means "teacher" in Hebrew; he has no official role in the liturgical service. The sermon is the only portion of the service that is usually spoken rather than sung.⁸

5. "Niggunim"

In eighteenth-century Poland, a populist movement called "Chassidism" espoused the principle that the spiritual aspect of prayer could be enhanced by intense and prolonged singing and dancing. The adherents of Chassidism developed a particular type of music called the "niggun" (Hebrew for melody), in which a short, basic tune is repeated many times, until the performer enters a hypnotic state in which the soul is said to achieve transcendence and "cling" to God. The niggun may be a setting of a liturgical text fragment, or, oftentimes, vocables such as "ya ma ma" or "ay di dai." Chassidim may sing a single niggun for hours, as an enhancement to their prayers (figure 4).

The niggun has achieved a resurgence of popularity in recent decades among all types of Jews. In modern synagogues, however, the niggun often degenerates into a jolly sing-along experience. The repetitions rarely exceed a few minutes, and spiritual transcendence is sought and achieved by only a few dedicated individuals.

6. Instrumental Music

The use of musical instruments has been proscribed in the synagogue for thousands of years. The twelfth-century Rabbi Moses Maimonides wrote in his compendium of Jewish law:

The rabbis at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple . . . prohibited playing musical instruments. . . It is forbidden to listen to them because of the destruction [of the Temple].⁹

Figure 3. Gerowich, *Adon Olam* (first verse)

In the nineteenth century, under the spell of humanism, Jews in Central and Western Europe, formerly segregated in ghettos, were allowed to associate and socialize with Christians to an unprecedented degree. After their first exposure to European culture, many Jews attempted to emulate Christian performance practice. As a result of this radical break from tradition, accepted at first only in "reformed" congregations, the organ was introduced into the synagogue service.

7. Choral Music

While choral singing was an integral part of the service in the Jerusalem Sanctuary some two thousand years ago, it never gained an important foothold in the synagogue.¹⁰ There was a brief period in the late sixteenth and early seven-

teenth centuries when choral singing became popular in the synagogues of Venice and the surrounding communities. The Mantuan composer, Salamone Rossi Hebreo, composed and published a collection of thirty-three motets to be sung in these synagogues. His music met with the opposition typically caused by any break with tradition. One of his choristers wrote in the early seventeenth century:

We have among us some connoisseurs of the science of singing, six or eight knowledgeable persons of our community. We raise our voices on the the festivals, and sing songs of praise in the synagogue to honor God with compositions of vocal harmony.

Figure 4. Chassidic niggun (composer unknown)

A man stood up to chase us away saying that it is not right to do so, because it is forbidden to rejoice, and that the singing of hymns and praises in harmony is forbidden. Although the congregation clearly enjoyed our singing, this man rose against us and condemned us publicly, saying that we had sinned before God!¹¹

In the nineteenth century several prominent cantors succeeded in introducing polyphonic choral singing into their synagogues. The most noteworthy were Salomon Sulzer in Vienna, Louis Lewandowski in Berlin, Israel Lovy and Samuel Naumbourg in Paris, and David Nowakowski in Odessa. Their choirs were well-trained, and many of their compositions became quite popular. Due to the atmosphere of tolerance in Europe and America, as well as the success of these talented innovators, choral singing has remained a regular feature in

many synagogues. Some of the greatest composers of the past two centuries have composed choral settings of the synagogue liturgy. Among them are Samuel Adler, Paul Ben-Haim, Arthur Berger, Herman Berlinsky, Leonard Bernstein, Ernest Bloch, Yehezkel Braun, Dave Brubeck, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, David Diamond, Norman Dinerstein, Lukas Foss, Herbert Fromm, Morton Gould, Jacques Halévy, Roy Harris, Felix Mendelssohn, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Darius Milhaud, Daniel Pinkham, Steve Reich, Bernard Rogers, Arnold Schoenberg, Franz Schubert, Robert Starer, William Grant Still, Kurt Weill, Lazar Weiner, Hugo Weisgall, Stephan Wolpe, and Yehudi Wyner.

Jewish Worship in America Today

In contemporary American synagogues one finds a wide variety of musical practices. In some synagogues the traditional elements have been virtually eliminated

and replaced by a homophonic hymnal. In others the cantor leads the service with a guitar, singing modern American pop-style settings. In others the music is all newly composed, performed by well-trained musicians. In some traditional synagogues, called "shuls," one can still hear the ancient chants, guarded as much as possible from change. In a few small enclaves of spirituality, the niggun can still be heard in its original intensity. The majority of synagogues in America, however, have fallen in step with the spirit of the times, which is reflected in a desire for demotic simplicity, a reduction of the liturgy to meet the needs of a community that lacks basic Jewish literacy, a dearth of spirituality, and an overwhelming desire to shorten the service as much as possible.

Fortunately, there are positive signs of renewal on the horizon. The cantorial seminaries in New York are training a new generation of synagogue musicians who are well versed in the treasures of the Jewish liturgy. The quest for spirituality that began in the 1960s has revived an interest in the power of music, unhurried music, to awaken the soul. Finally, the growing acceptance of multiculturalism in the U.S. has resulted in a renaissance of many forms of Jewish liturgical music both in the synagogue and on the concert stage.

NOTES

- ¹ Mishnah Arachin 2:3-6
- ² In 515 b.c.e. the Sanctuary in Jerusalem was rebuilt and, until it was destroyed again in 70 c.e., existed side-by-side with the synagogues.
- ³ Among Jews living in Arab lands, several other scales are heard.
- ⁴ Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1929; reprint ed. Dover, 1992), 40.
- ⁵ Idelsohn, 42.
- ⁶ When referring to the practice of cantillation, writers from many different backgrounds continue to use the word "read" (or its equivalent in another language) when referring to "chant."
- ⁷ Among the Jews in Arab lands, one can hear several other modes, as well.
- ⁸ In some congregations the sermon is delivered in a primitive chantlike recitative.
- ⁹ Maimonides: The Laws of Fasting 5:14



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¹⁰ Choral singing in Jerusalem two thousand years ago was quite different from our contemporary conception of the choral art. The texture was probably monophonic or heterophonic, rather than polyphonic, and the tone quality was most likely more nasal than the bel canto ideal.

¹¹ Israel Adler, "The Rise of Art Music in the Italian Ghetto," in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 336-37.

—CJ—

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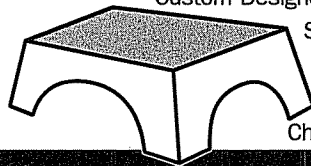
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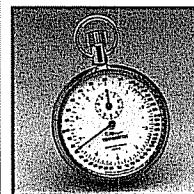


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