

LITERATURE FORUM



Music of the Jewish People

by

Joshua R. Jacobson

I avoid using the term “Jewish music.” How can music be Jewish? Does music keep kosher? Is music circumcised? No—*people* can be Jewish, and that’s why I prefer the terminology “Music of the Jewish People.”

It is complicated. Is Jewish a religion, a nationality, a race, or ethnicity? In which Repertoire & Standards (R&S) category does Jewish music belong—Music for Worship or Ethnic and Multicultural perspectives or neither? Shall we juxtapose Jewish music with Catholic music or perhaps with French music or Hispanic music? But then where would we place Franz Schubert’s *Tov Lehdos*, a setting of a synagogue Psalm in Hebrew—Catholic or Jewish? Where would we place Darius Milhaud’s *Service Sacré*, a setting of the synagogue liturgy—French or

Jewish? And what about Yéhezkel Braun’s *Seven Sephardic Folksongs*—Hispanic or Jewish? Why not both? And why not place Ernest Bloch’s *Sacred Service* in the same category as Brahms’ *German Requiem*—simply great music for a concert?

A few years ago, I heard a high school honor choir at an ACDA national conference performing a synagogue motet by Salamone Rossi (c.1570–c.1630) in a program of “ethnic and multicultural” music. I was thrilled to hear it performed, but Rossi’s motets are no more multicultural than are those of his better-known colleague, Monteverdi. The lyrics are Hebrew, and the original performance venue was a synagogue in Mantua, but the style is hardly different from that of Christian composers of the late Renaissance/early Baroque era.

Let us say that (traditional) Jewish music is music that has been used by Jews more than by others and therefore has become associated with Jewish people. And let us say that a Jewish choral composition is one that either incorporates elements of traditional Jewish music or uses a Jewish text (a text associated with Jewish people) or is in a Jewish language or is descriptive of Jewish people or is intended for use in a Jewish ritual.

We should not pretend that anything written by a Jew is Jewish music. (Al-

though the Nazis in 1930’s Germany did assert that any music composed or even performed by a Jew was “degenerate.”) Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas” isn’t Jewish music. But do you have to be Jewish to compose Jewish music? I would include in our category Eric Whitacre’s *Five Hebrew Love Songs*, Franz Schubert’s *Tov Lehdos*, and Modest Mussorgsky’s cantata, *Joshua Bin-Nun*.

Do you have to be Jewish to perform Jewish music? Of course not! Although someone who is steeped in Jewish culture and tradition may have a head start in regard to familiarity with the language, the context, and the subtleties of performance practice. I have conducted Ramirez’s *Misa Criolla*, but a conductor from Argentina would have an advantage over me. I have conducted choral arrangements of African American spirituals, but someone who is steeped in that tradition would certainly bring a lot more to the table.

The first time I conducted Handel’s *Messiah* at Northeastern University, one of the students in the chorus came up to me after the concert—an Irish Catholic girl by the name of Terry B. She said to me, “How can a Jew like you conduct Handel’s *Messiah*?” I stammered something about a musical performer being like an actor: you assume a persona while you are on stage then go back to being who you are. But maybe Terry had

Joshua R. Jacobson is Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities, Northeastern University Visiting Professor and Senior Consultant, School of Jewish Music at Hebrew College Founder/Director, Zamir Chorale of Boston

LITERATURE FORUM



a point. Take three conductors of equal musical competence—one is a devout Christian, another is a devout agnostic, and the third is a devout Jew. Which of the three will deliver a performance of Handel's *Messiah* that best represents the sentiments of the composer? And which of the three would be the best interpreter of Bloch's *Sacred Service*? It is complicated.

Here is another complication. Scattered for nearly two millennia, Jews absorbed the culture of the people among whom they lived. Jewish music became acculturated with the soundscapes of various majority populations. As a result there are many Jewish musics, especially with regard to non-sacred songs. The folk songs of the Jews of Yemen

sound very different from those of their co-religionists in Germany, Morocco, Ukraine, etc.

There is not a tremendous amount of repertoire for this genre of Jewish music. Formal synagogue choirs didn't appear until the nineteenth century (although there are a few notable exceptions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Until the twentieth century, aside from the language, this music was by and large modeled after and sounded remarkably similar to choral music written for Christian churches. So the music of Salamone Rossi may remind listeners of the motets of Orlando di Lasso; Salomon Sulzer's choral music was modeled after the part songs of his friend Franz Schubert; Louis Lewandowski's compo-

sitions drew their inspiration from Felix Mendelssohn. In the past hundred years, however, perhaps inspired by Bartok and other nationalists, many synagogue composers have attempted to infuse their music with the modes and rhythms of traditional Jewish chant. Among those composers who went in this direction are Lazare Saminski, Ernest Bloch, Paul Ben-Haim, Samuel Adler, and Yehudi Wyner.

Choirs formed for the purpose of singing secular Jewish music are not found until the beginning of the twentieth century: first in Poland, and soon thereafter throughout Europe in the land of Israel and in North and South America. The repertoire for these ensembles consisted of arrangements of Jewish folk songs and original compositions and classic choral works based on "Old Testament" librettos. Composers and arrangers rose to the challenge to provide these ensembles with appropriate material.

Conductors looking for Hebrew choral music should begin with the fourth volume in *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire*¹ published by earthsongs. It has lists of recommended repertoire, helpful essays, indices, and a comprehensive pronunciation guide. But not all Jewish choral music is in Hebrew. There are lovely folk songs, theater songs and art songs in Yiddish, a hybrid language, similar to German, spoken by many Jews in Northern Europe. There is a rich repertoire of *romanceros* and other folk songs of Jews living in the Mediterranean basin. Many of these Jews traced their ancestry back to Spain before being driven out by the Inquisition in 1492. Their patois was Ladino, a language derived from old Castilian Spanish. Of course, many Jews wrote music expressing their identity in the language of the country in which they lived, so you can also find Jewish choral



music in plain American English².

Some of the greatest composers have contributed to this repertoire. Leonard Bernstein is known for his *Chichester Psalms*, but conductors should also consider his *Kaddish Symphony*, *Hashkivenu* and several shorter pieces. Ernest Bloch's *Sacred Service* is fairly well known, but Darius Milhaud's charming *Service Sacré*, a setting of the same liturgy, deserves to be performed more frequently. Arnold Schoenberg's contribution includes *Kol Nidre*, *A Survivor from Warsaw*, and *De Profundis*, a setting in the original Hebrew of Psalm 130. Kurt Weill wrote a bluesy setting of the Friday night *Kiddush* (dedicated to his father, who was the chief cantor of Dessau), as well as a cantata, *The Eternal Road* (recently rereleased by Schott as *The Road of Promise*). Alice Parker was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists to write *An American Kedushah*, a setting from the Saturday morning sanctification liturgy. Modest Mussorgsky's cantata, *Joshua Bin-Nun*, is based on a Hassidic melody. Opera composer Jacques Halévy (son of Cantor Elie Halévy) composed *Min Ha-Metsar*, a setting in Hebrew of verses from Psalm 118. Franz Schubert was commissioned by his friend Cantor Salomon Sulzer to compose *Tov Lehodos*, a setting in Hebrew of Psalm 92. And most readers will be familiar with Eric Whitacre's *Five Hebrew Love Songs* based on poetry by the composer's Israeli wife, Hila Plitmann.

Consider also that when you choose repertoire, whatever you choose, do so because you believe that it is great music, not because you think it's politically correct to be multicultural. Chanukah, for example, is not the Jewish Christmas. Chanukah is (at least it used to be) a minor holiday on the Jewish calendar. Sometimes tokenism is worse than neglect. Yes, Virginia, there are some good

choral pieces for Chanukah, but December isn't the only month to program "Music of the Jewish People." There is a wealth of wonderful music from Jewish traditions available for programming the year round—not just because it's Jewish, but because it's good music.

NOTES

- ¹ Disclosure: I am the coauthor of this book.
² Visit <<http://www.joshuajacobson.org/#!jewish-choral/cq66>> for an annotated list of recommended repertoire.

Music of the Muslim World

by

André de Quadros

Music of the Muslim world and particularly its choral music are little understood or known largely due to three elements that are misunderstood and contested: Muslim music, Muslim world, and Muslim choral music. This article will offer a brief overview of each of these elements, with a list of suggestions for further reading listed at the end.

Muslim Music

Islamic scholars hotly dispute the role of music in Islam. In representing

André de Quadros is Professor of Music, Boston University Music Director and Conductor, Manado State University Choir (Indonesia)

their divergent positions they refer not only to the Qur'an but also to the *hadīth* (ثِيَدِج), the body of sayings ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad; and the *fiqh* (فَهَقَف), the code of Islamic jurisprudence. Both the *hadīth* and the *fiqh* are ways in which the Qur'an may be understood and explained. Quite simply, however, the word "music" doesn't work when we speak about music in Islam. There is a large body of Muslim religious recitation, of which Qur'anic recitation is the most common. The *adhān* (أَذَان), or call to prayer recited by a muezzin from mosques, is another such example. Also widespread are the hymns—*inshad*—belonging within the category of religious recitation. Looking with Western eyes, ears, and concepts of music, we may incorrectly classify Muslim religious recitation as music.

Muslim World

The Muslim world is vast, numbering more than 1.8 billion people, which is more than a quarter of the world's population. The Muslim world is frequently taken to refer to Muslim civilizations, including those minorities who are non-Muslims. It is in this sense that the Muslim world is used in this article. Common beliefs concerning Muslims are that Muslims are Arabs, Arabs are Muslims, Palestinians are Muslims, Muslims are anti-Western, and women are oppressed in Islam. While there is some truth in all of these statements, they by themselves provide an incomplete picture of a finely grained and nuanced reality of the Muslim world. A simple investigation reveals factual inaccuracies and inconsistencies. For example, the largest Muslim country is Indonesia; almost a third of the population of Lebanon is Christian, and so on.

LITERATURE FORUM

Muslim Choral Music

What, then, is Muslim choral music? Choral music, as we understand it, particularly in the context of an organization such as the American Choral Directors Association, consists of music that has emerged from seventeenth century European liturgical and secular life, generally consisting of a group of people singing together, frequently in parts. There are numerous examples of group singing in the Muslim world, almost all of which is non-notated. Many of these group singing genres date back several centuries, such as the genre of Arab music called the *muwashshahat*, a song tradition that started in Muslim Spain and has continued vigorously until our times. However, most of these group-singing traditions might not be labeled choral music in the sense to which I refer.

While there are numerous examples of Muslim group singing, notated part-singing is a product of colonization,

Westernization, Christianization, and now globalization. It is becoming increasingly popular for composers in the Muslim world to arrange and compose music for the Western-style choir. Although the Muslim devotional canon is dominated by Arabic, secular music usually occurs in local vernacular. The Qur'an is always recited in Arabic, regardless of location. Additionally, several prayers are always recited in Arabic or in hybrid languages heavily laden with Arabic words. The choral music of the Muslim world has enormous linguistic variety, and conductors can expect to find choral compositions and arrangements in Turkish, Bahasa Indonesian, Persian, Urdu, and several other languages.

An original, secular style of composition is exemplified in *Ai-yu*, by Mohamad Abdelfatah; the composer creates a multi-voice piece based on a simple Arabic exclamation. By contrast, Muammer Sun's *Entarisi ala Benziyor*, is an arrangement of a highly popular tra-

ditional Turkish song with a heptatonic melodic orientation (6 notes, G to E flat) and a traditional rhythmic mode (2+2+2+3=9/8). In *Fog Elna Khel*, Salim Bali arranges a Syrian/Iraqi love song for SATB chorus. A consideration of music of the Muslim world is incomplete without examining some of the music of Southeast Asia. There are large Muslim minorities in the predominantly Catholic Philippines, and, as stated earlier, Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim country. Ivan Yohan's *Soleram* originates in a dance song from the western Indonesian province of Sumatera. Muslim children's songs from the Filipino Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) have provided delightful raw material for choral compositions, such as *Pok pok alimpako* by Francisco Feliciano and *Mayamog akun* by Fabian Obispo. Finally, in *Adinu*, Shireen Abu Khader and this author explore an ancient peace-loving Sufi text by Ibn Arabi in a simple arrangement that seeks to offer opportunities for choral improvisation.

Choral Music Citations and Suggestions for Further Reading (All scores cited are available through earthsongs publishing)

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