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Jewish Music in the Italian Renaissance

By Joshua R. Jacobson

From the 14th through the 16th centuries, central Italy was abloom with an efflorescence of new thinking in politics, philosophy and the arts. The prolific writers and artists of this period considered their work to be a reawakening from the slumber of the Dark Ages—a rebirth, a Renaissance, of the glories of the classical period.

The court of Mantua embodied the new spirit of royal luxury and artistic magnificence. At the end of the 15th century the duchess Isabella D'Este Gonzaga brought many of the finest musicians of Italy to Mantua to compose and perform for the entertainment of the royal family.

Jews were not only tolerated in the enlightened duchy of Mantua, they were often allowed to intermingle freely with non-Jews. In this liberal atmosphere, Jews were affected to an exceptional degree by the prevailing literary, artistic and humanistic tendencies. In Renaissance Mantua, Jews achieved a remarkably successful synthesis between their ancestral Hebraic culture and that of their secular environment. Those who merited recognition in the general society as physicians, astronomers, playwrights, dancers, musicians and so on were, in many cases, loyal Jews, conversant with Hebrew and devoted to traditional scholarship.

Some of Mantua's most famous dancers and choreographers were Jews. Isabella's dancing instructor was the Jew, Guglielmo Ebreo Pesaro, author of one of the most important treatises on choreography written in the 15th century.

For a 100-year period starting in the middle of the 16th century, there was an active Jewish Theatre troupe in Mantua, known as the Università Israelitica. The citizens of Mantua were all aware of the Università's unusual schedule: on Fridays, performances would be held in the afternoon rather than in the evening, so as not to interfere with the *festa del sabbato*.

Throughout the 16th century we find a series of Jewish vocalists and instrumentalists in the service of the dukes of Mantua, contributing greatly to the splendor of the court of the House of Gonzaga. But standing head and shoulders above all other Jewish musicians of the Renaissance period, and a considerable musical figure in any context, was Salomone Rossi—singer, violinist and composer at the court of Mantua from 1587 to 1628.

In Rossi we see the apex of Jewish participation in the Italian Renaissance. He was a gifted secular composer who collaborated with the late-Renaissance / early Baroque musical giants of the era, including Giovanni Gastoldi (1550-1622) and Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643). During the period of his employ-

ment at Mantua he wrote volumes of songs, dances and concert music for his Christian patrons who, in gratitude, exempted Salamone from wearing the stipulated Jewish badge of shame.

But at the same time, here is the Jewish composer who proudly appended to his name the word “Ebreo”—Salamone Rossi the Jew. He was descended from the illustrious Italian-Jewish family de Rossi (which is the Italian translation of the Hebrew family name, *Mei-ha’adumim*). This proud family, which included the famous and controversial Bible scholar, Azariyah de Rossi and a number of fine musicians, traced its ancestry back to the exiles from Jerusalem, carried away to Rome by the Emperor Titus in the year 70.

As a young man, Rossi made his reputation as a violinist. In 1587 he was hired by Duke Vincenzo as a resident musician at the court of Mantua. But, in addition to his performing, Rossi was also composing music for violins and voices. Like his colleague Monteverdi, Rossi also excelled in the composition of serious madrigals.

In the field of instrumental music, Rossi was a bold innovator. He was the first composer to apply to instrumental music the principles of monodic song, in which one melody dominates over secondary accompanying parts. His sonatas, among the first in the literature, provided for the development of an idiomatic and virtuosic violin technique.

Still, it is undoubtedly in the field of synagogue music that we find Rossi’s most daring innovations. Since the beginning of the last diaspora some 1950 years ago, Jews in Europe retained an ancient and exotic musical tradition. Instruments were banned from the synagogue as a sign of mourning for the destruction of the ancient Jerusalem Temple. New melodies of Gentile origin were considered a deviation from the pure near-Eastern tradition, and as such, were forbidden. Change was frowned upon; prayer tunes were kept in their original form, no harmonization was allowed.

By the early 17th century, the times were changing—from within. The northern Italian Jews of Mantua and Venice and Ferrara had developed a taste for *le nuove musiche*, the new music of the Renaissance (after the title of a 1602 song collection for solo voice and basso continuo by Giulio Caccini, summing up the principles of the Florentine Camerata musicians). They began to question why the music of their synagogues should continue to sound so old-fashioned. The times were also changing from without, the Counter-Reformation demanded enforcement of the laws that segregated the Jew from his neighbor. The first strictly segregated Jewish neighborhood was established in Venice in 1516. Named after the foundry located nearby, it was called the “Ghetto.” The enforced segregation in Mantua culminated in Duke Vincenzo’s establishment of a barricaded ghetto in 1612. Now, at the

peak of the renaissance, Italian Jews were forced to turn increasingly inward. Their appetites for *le nuove musiche* would have to be satisfied within the confines of their own community. The synagogue would provide the venue for this fine art.

In Padua and Ferrara there were synagogue choirs at the end of the 16th century. In Modena there was an organ, in Venice a complete orchestra. Flaunting the centuries-old tradition, these practices came under heavy criticism from many conservative members of the community. Rabbi Leone of Modena wrote about his experiences organizing a choir in Ferrara.

We have among us connoisseurs of the science of singing, six or eight knowledgeable persons of our community. We raise our voices on the festivals, and sing songs of praise in the synagogue to honor God with compositions of vocal harmony. 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 therefore also forbidden. Although the congregation clearly enjoyed our singing, this man rose against us and condemned us publicly, saying that we had sinned before God!

Yet, so strong was the Renaissance spirit that a number of enlightened rabbis defended the new musical practice in published responsa. Rabbi Leone's responsum was among them.

I do not see how anyone with a brain in his skull could cast any doubt on the propriety of praising God in song in the synagogue on special Sabbaths and festivals. Such music is as much a religious obligation as that which is performed to bring joy to bridegroom and bride—whom it is our duty to adorn and gladden with all manner of rejoicing. No intelligent person, no scholar ever thought of forbidding the use of the greatest possible beauty of voice in praising the Lord, blessed be He, nor the use of musical art which awakens the soul to His glory.

Most significantly, Rossi is the first Jew to compose, perform and publish polyphonic settings of the synagogue liturgy for mixed choir. In the preface to the publication of this synagogue music, Rossi acknowledged the spiritual inspiration for his art.

The Lord has been my strength and He has put new songs into my mouth. Inspired, I wove these into an arrangement of sweet sounds, and I designated these items for rejoicing on the holy festivals. I did not restrain my lips, but ever increased my striving to enhance the Psalms of David, King of Israel, until I set many of them and shaped them into proper harmonic form, so that they would have greater stature for discriminating ears.

In the year 1630 the city of Mantua was stormed by invading Austrian troops. The Jewish ghetto was ravished and its inhabitants fled the town.

The Renaissance was over for the Jewish community. Choral music was no longer heard in the synagogue. Salomone Rossi probably died in that year and was all but forgotten.

It was some 200 years later that Baron Edmond de Rothschild, on a trip to Italy, stumbled on a strange collection of old music books bearing the name *Salamone Rossi Ebreo*. On his return to France, intrigued by what he found, Rothschild handed over the collection to Samuel Naumbourg, cantor of the Great Synagogue (known as the Rothschild Shul) in Paris. In 1876, Cantor Naumbourg published the first modern edition of Rossi's music (title page of 1623 edition shown below). Once again the voice of one of the sweetest singers of Israel, Salamone Rossi Ebreo, was heard in the land.

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