



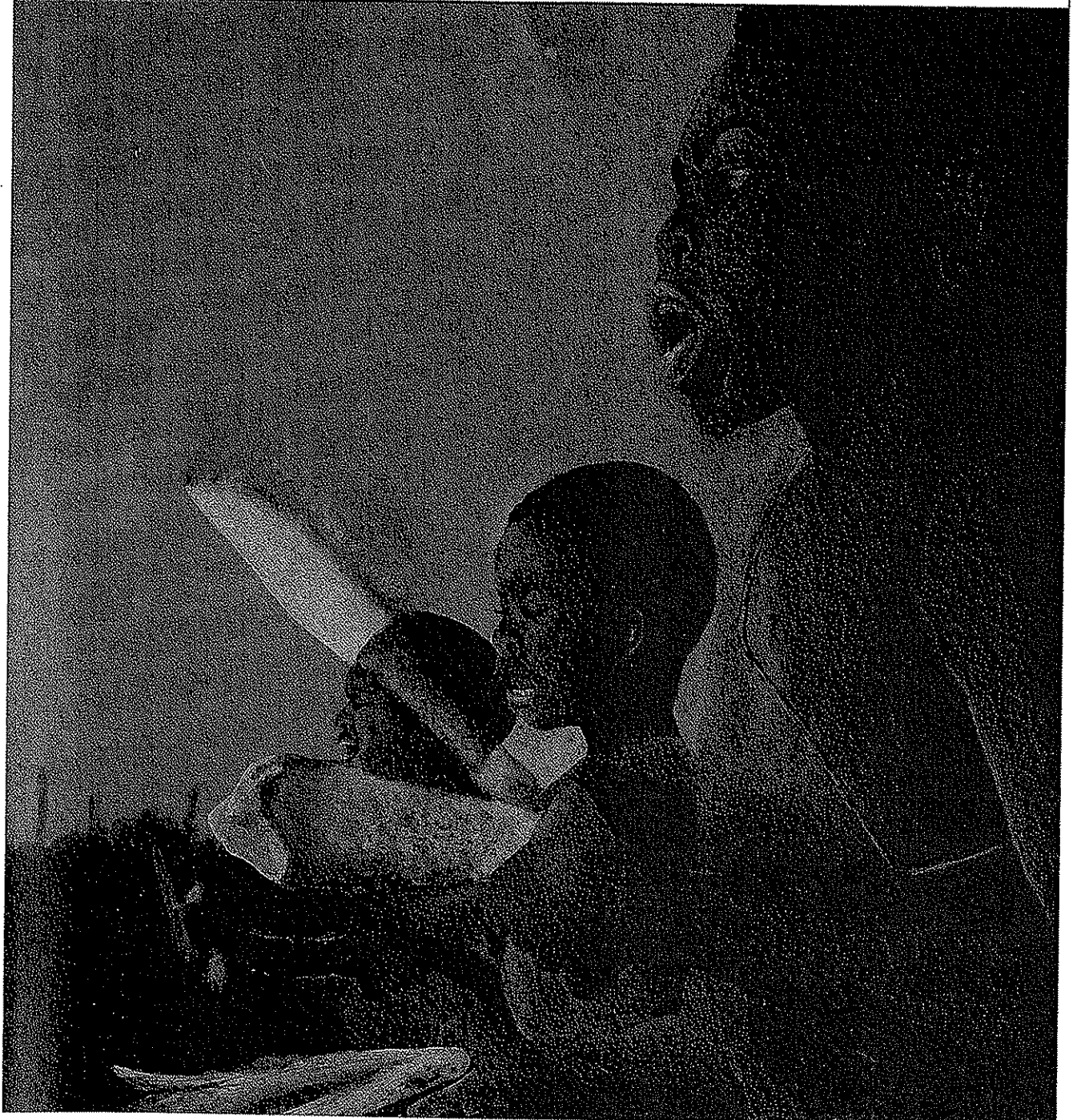
The Orff Echo

Quarterly Publication of the American Orff-Schulwerk Association

Music and Movement Education

Spring 2001

Volume XXXIII Number 3



What is Jewish Music?

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Multiculturalism is here to stay. Most teachers in America today are aware of the benefits of exposing their students to a variety of cultural artifacts. Choral concerts and classroom curricula now feature musics from China as well as Austria, Brazil as well as Italy. African-American and Native American traditions now stand alongside the European American "mainstream."

But how does "Jewish music" fit in? What is Jewish music? Is it music of a culture, of a race, of a religion, or of a nation? The exploration of these questions may not provide an absolute answer, but it can be a stimulating exercise in identity.

Is "Jewish" a religion? Yes. Judaism could be defined in terms of an institutionalized system of beliefs and practices. Thus Jewish music would be any music used in conjunction with Jewish ritual and spiritual praxis. This repertoire includes the ancient melodies used to chant ("cantillate") the Bible and devotional music for meditation, as well as modern guitar-based liturgy. By this criterion, any music used in the synagogue service would be considered Jewish, even Franz Schubert's Hebrew Psalm setting or a Friday-night hymn sung to the tune of "Scarborough Fair." But must we be limited to this definition? There are many men and women who consider themselves Jewish but who do not follow any institutionalized beliefs and practices.

Is "Jewish" a race? A race is defined, at least in part, by similar genetic inheritances and identifiable physical traits. Ancient Jewish lore identifies Abraham and Sarah, a couple who lived some 4,000 years ago, as being the progenitors of the Jewish people. In fact, the word "Jew" is derived from the name of Abraham and Sarah's great-grandson, Judah. If we say that any music created by a member of the Jewish race is "Jewish music," our category would include Mendelssohn's "Reformation" Symphony, Bernstein's *West Side Story*, Berlin's "White Christmas," Offenbach's

Orpheus in the Underworld, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. This theorem was carried to its destructive extreme by the Nazi party between 1933 and 1945. Declaring that the Aryan race was superior to all others, Nazi ideologues called for the suppression and eventual destruction of the artifacts of all "inferior" races. The Nazi government censored music of any composer who was deemed to be racially Jewish, even if that person professed the Protestant religion, even if that person was a citizen of the German nation. Also censored were performances by Jews. Bruno Walter was barred from conducting the Berlin Philharmonic to prevent him from degrading Beethoven's symphonies with a "Jewish" interpretation.

We may wish to dismiss the racial definition of Jewish music. The concept that people are born with insuperable inherited traits based on ancestry seems to be at variance with the American ideal that all humans are created equal. Furthermore, we must also deal with the reality that many men and women have joined the Jewish people by choice, rather than by birth. Abraham's blood does not flow in their veins; they do not share Sarah's DNA.

Is "Jewish" a nation? In the ancient world a Jew was a Judean, a citizen of the nation of Judea. But 1,900 years ago the Roman army crushed a rebellion and put an end to Judean independence. Since that time the majority of the Jewish people have been living in exile, expatriates in foreign lands, maintaining, to varying degrees of efficacy, their identification with the distant homeland. In 1948 a Jewish state was reestablished in Judea. Might we consider any music produced by a citizen of the Jewish state to be Jewish music? Here again, we are faced with several problems. How do we categorize the music of a Muslim or Christian citizen of the state of Israel? What about Israeli rap music (with Hebrew lyrics)? What of the Israeli composer, the creator of abstract music, who considers herself part of a

transnational community of expression that is not limited by borders?

Perhaps, then, "Jewish" is a culture. Webster defines culture as "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group," implying that the concept of culture is dependent on the three concepts that we have just investigated: religion, race and nation. Perhaps a better term would be "sub-culture," since for many centuries Jews were a minority, living apart, exhibiting characteristic patterns of behavior sufficient to distinguish them from their surrounding culture. But the ghettos walls were not impermeable; through a process of acculturation, Jews living in Germany became somewhat Germanized, and Jews living in Yemen became somewhat Yemenized. Jewish culture resists monolithic categorization. Rather than speak of a typical "Jewish music," it may be more accurate to use the term "Jewish musics," reflecting the variety of colors within the Jewish Diaspora.

Is Jewish identity the product of nature or nurture? Is every human being predisposed to create music that in some way reflects his race? Or does the environment to which one is exposed (especially in one's early years) form the wellspring for future creativity? There is no conclusive answer. In 1850 Richard Wagner wrote, "[O]nly he who has unconsciously grown up within the bond of this [historical] community takes also any share in its creations."¹ In 1939 Leonard Bernstein wrote, "It is easily understandable that a composer who is a second-generation American, whose parents were immigrants, still maintains a close contact with the old racial traditions. If the traditions are part of his childhood, they are inevitably part of his life."²

Let's try one other approach to our problem — a functional approach — by looking at how people "use" music, first by examining the intent of the performer. The most popular hymn for Chanukkah, *Maaz Tsur*, is generally sung to a tune that is comprised of three medieval

German folk songs.³ A congregation may sing the Sabbath hymn *Lekhah Dodi* to the tune of "Scarborough Fair." Neither of these instances negates the Jewishness of the music because the singers are using the melodies as a means of expressing Jewish religious identity. Likewise, the national anthem of the state of Israel, "Hatikvah," is sung to a Moldavian folk song, "Carul Cu Boi." But that fact is irrelevant for the men and women who use "Hatikvah" to express their national identity.

We might also investigate the intention of the composer. A mother sings a lullaby to her baby. If the language is Yiddish, if the lyrics reveal the mother's aspiration that her son grow up to become a Torah scholar, if her melody contains motifs derived from synagogue chant, we could consider this to be a Jewish lullaby. In 1942 Leonard Bernstein composed his first symphony. He gave it the title "Jeremiah," a programmatic reference to the ancient Hebrew prophet. Each of the main themes in this symphony is based on traditional Hebrew synagogue chant.⁴ By

dedicating the symphony to his father, Bernstein may have been making a gesture of reconciliation with his somewhat estranged family and his religion. There are also suggestions that this creation was Bernstein's reaction to the tragedy of the Jews in Europe.⁵

One of the most outspoken Jewish composers, Ernest Bloch (1880-1959), wrote:

Racial consciousness is something that every great artist must have. A tree must have its roots deep down in its soil. A composer who says something is not only himself. He is his forefathers! He is his people! Then his message takes on a vitality and significance which nothing else can give it, and which is absolutely essential in great art. I try to compose with this in mind. I am a Jew. I have the virtues and defects of the Jew. It is my own belief that when I am most Jewish I compose most effectively.⁶

So what is Jewish music? Perhaps the best answer takes into account both intent

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and observation: music that is perceived to have characteristics associated with Jews and not with others, or music that is more meaningful to Jews than to non-Jews. Perhaps the solution is an acknowledgement that there is no such thing as "Jewish music"; we would instead speak of "Jewish musics." Or perhaps it is vanity to imagine that we could come up with a definitive answer; perhaps the deepest understanding arises from the process of formulating the questions.

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Activities and Resources

Suggested activities

- Nearly everyone in America is either an immigrant or the descendent of an immigrant. Ask students to investigate and report on the traditional musics of their own families or ancestors.
- Discuss the concept of America as a "melting pot." Compare that with the model of a rainbow of cultural pluralism. Compare that with the ultra-nationalism that claims cultural superiority.
- We all "use" music in one way or another. Ask students to make a list of how they use music throughout the week.
- Discuss issues of identification. Ask students how they self-identify in terms of race, religion, nation and culture. Ask them if any of these identifications is reflected in the music they choose to sing or listen to.
- Discuss some of these issues: What does it mean when you sing "The Star Spangled Banner" at a sports event? What did Jimi Hendrix mean when he played his unique rendition at Woodstock? What does it mean when a Jewish person declines to join in the singing of Christmas carols?
- There are many wonderful compositions based on traditional Jewish music. For example, the second movement of Bernstein's

Jeremiah Symphony (discussed above) is based on a chant used in the synagogue for the liturgical reading of the book of Jeremiah. But the composer has put an interesting spin on that chant; for the section that he called "Profanation," in which the people are mocking the prophet, Bernstein has distorted the unmetered cantillation to create asymmetrical phrasing, unstable meter and ragged jazzy rhythms. Have the students listen first to the traditional chant, then to the symphony. Invite them to comment on the nature and meaning of the transformation.

Recommended texts:

- Eisenstein, Judith Kaplan. (1973). *Heritage of Music: The Music of the Jewish People*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations.
- Gradenwitz, Peter. (1996). *The Music of Israel* (second edition). Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press (first edition: New York: W. W. Norton, 1949).
- Sapoznik, Henry. (1999). *Klezmer!: Jewish Music from Old World to Our World*. New York: Schirmer Books.

Recommended song anthologies:

- Moltek, Eleanor (ed.). (1972). *Mir Trogn A*

Gezang!: Favorite Yiddish Songs of Our Generation. New York: Workmen's Circle.

Moltek, Eleanor (ed.). (1988). *Pearls of Yiddish Song: Favorite Folk, Art and Theatre Songs*. New York: Workmen's Circle.

Moltek, Eleanor (ed.). *Songs of Generations: New Pearls of Yiddish Song*. New York: Workmen's Circle.

Pasternack, Velvel (ed.). (1994). *The International Jewish Songbook*. Tara Publications.

Recommended recordings of folk songs and popular music:

Israel's 240 Greatest Songs (Gadalu Yachad). Hed Artzi ACUM15950.

Hear Our Voices: Songs from the Ghettos and the Camps. The Zamir Chorale. HaZamir HZ-909.

Jewish Alternative Movement: A Guide for the Perplexed. Knitting Factory Records KFR216.

Klez. The Klezmer Conservatory Band. Vanguard VMD-79449.

Recommended recordings of chants:

Haftarah: Tradition Ashekenaz. Jerusalem: The Institute for Jewish Music.

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Haftarah: Tradition Sepharad Yerushalayim. Jerusalem: The Institute for Jewish Music.

Haftarah: Tradition Yemen. Jerusalem: The Institute for Jewish Music.

Recommended recordings of artistic works based on Jewish themes:

Bernstein, Leonard. *Bernstein Judaica* (including *Jeremiah Symphony*, *Kaddish Symphony*, *Dybbuk* and *Chichester Psalms*). DG 289 463 462-2 CD.

Bloch, Ernest. *Schelomo*. SVC-11HD

Golijov, Osvaldo. *K'vakarat*. Performed by the Kronos Quartet on *Night Prayers*. Elektra/ Nonesuch 979346-2.

Reich, Steve. *Tehillim*. ECM 827411-2.

Schonberg, Arnold. *A Survivor from Warsaw*, Boulez. SONY S2K-44571.

Statman, Andy. *Between Heaven and Earth: Music of the Jewish Mystics*. Shanachie 64079.

Recommended videos:

Sepharad: Judeo-Spanish Music (Ergo Media, 27 minutes)

Teiman: The Music of Yemenite Jewry (Ergo Media, 27 minutes)

Zamir: Jewish Voices Return to Poland (PBS 2000, 57 minutes)

Recommended web resources:

Tara Music: www.jewishmusic.com (CDs, books, anthologies, videos)

Transcontinental Music Publications: www.etranscon.com (sheet music)

World Music Press: www.worldmusicpress.com (sheet music, anthologies, educational materials)

Ergo Media: www.jewishvideo.com (videos)

The Zamir Chorale of Boston: www.zamir.org (CDs, resources)

Jewish Music Web Center: www.jmwc.org (links)

The Jewish Music Research Center: <http://shum.cc.huji.ac.il/~jmrc/jmrc.htm> (research materials)

The Institute for Jewish Music: www.renanot.co.il (CDs and print anthologies of sacred music traditions)

The Jewish Music Center at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv: www.bh.org.il (CDs)

Jew-who: <http://jewwho.com/cgi-bin/f2b/jewwho/catagory.cgi?music> (a listing of prominent Jewish musicians)

Notes

¹ Richard Wagner, "Das Judentum in der Musik," (*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, September 3 and 6, 1850). Revised edition

published as a pamphlet by J. J. Weber, Leipzig, 1869. English translation by William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 84.

² Leonard Bernstein, *Findings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 98.

³ Joshua Jacobson, "Choral Music for Chanukah" (*Choral Journal* 31:2, 1990), pp. 19-28.

⁴ Bernstein consciously drew on two motifs: "The first theme of the scherzo is paraphrased from a traditional Hebrew chant, and the opening phrase of the vocal part in the 'Lamentation' is based on a liturgical cadence." At the same time he was unaware that other motifs, such as the synagogue melody at the very beginning of the first movement, had emerged subconsciously: "Other remembrances of Hebrew liturgical music are a matter of emotional quality, rather than the notes themselves." Bernstein, *Jeremiah: Symphony No. 1* (preface), p. 3.

⁵ "How can I be blind to the problems of my people? I'd give everything I have to be able to strike a death blow at Fascism." From an interview published in the *New York Journal-American*, quoted in Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 123.

⁶ Quoted in an interview with Olin Downes in the *Boston Post*, December 31, 1916, p. 29.





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