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Chanting the Hebrew Bible: The Sense of Cantillation

, will be published by the Jewish Publication Society in Spring 2001.

I teach Jewish music in several different contexts in college courses that expose students to cultures other than their own, in graduate courses and seminars for specialists, in adult education workshops, and in concerts for the general public. In each case I try to make people more aware about how they 'use' music, and to help expand their definition of Jewishness in music.

What is Jewish?

Music can be a powerful tool in the exploration of Jewish identity. But what is 'Jewish'? Is it a religion, a race, a culture or a nation? If 'Jewish' is a religion, then Jewish music would be limited to music used in conjunction with Jewish ritual and spiritual praxis. If 'Jewish' is defined as a race, then Jewish music would be music composed or performed by anyone who has Jewish blood. If 'Jewish' is a nation, then Jewish music would be music that comes from the Jewish state, the land of Israel. If 'Jewish' is a culture (or subculture), then Jewish music would be that music which is used uniquely by people who share certain cultural traits. Under which definition would you consider Irving Berlins "White Christmas" to be Jewish music? What about "Tov LeHodos," composed by Franz Schubert for Vienna's Seitenstettengasse synagogue? Modern Israeli rap music? A Yiddish lullaby? An Ethiopian Jewish chant for the circumcision ritual? These and other works can be used to initiate and stimulate a discussion on Jewish identity.

Music as a Window

If music is a vehicle of expression, then we learn something about a composers personality by listening to his or her music. Listening to Beethoven's "Eroica Symphony," we can sense something of the composer's inner struggle. But, at the same time, we can sense something about the society to which Beethoven belonged or the society against which he rebelled, the turmoil of a Europe engulfed in war, striving for emancipation. Music can be used in the classroom as a means of instantly accessing other cultures. Analyze the polyphonic synagogue music created by Salamone Rossi (c. 1570–c. 1630), and you begin to understand something

about a unique period in premodern Jewish history when Jews emerged from their ghettos and participated in the Italian Renaissance. Analyze the song "Jdische Todessang" by Martin Rosenberg, composed in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in 1942, and you have opened a window to empathize with the horrors of the Holocaust.

Sacred Bridges

Some music illustrates that which is unique to one culture, while other music illustrates what different groups may have in common. When I juxtapose a Gregorian chant, "In Exitu Israel" (Tonus Peregrinus) with a Jewish chant, "Betset Yisrael" (Moroccan tradition), my students will grapple with the fact that the two are virtually identical. How can both religions each claim that its melody is ancient, authoritative, and unique? The answer lies in the dawn of Christianity, when its liturgy was nearly identical to that of the synagogue.

Why Chant?

In traditional Jewish practice, the liturgy of the sacred service is chanted, not recited with the spoken voice. In fact, Jewish law requires that ritual texts be chanted. I invite my students to speculate on the reasons for this practice. Here are some of the points that we cover:

- The human urge to communicate with supernatural beings through music is virtually universal. In the mythology of many peoples, music is presented as an invention of the gods. Since it was the gods who granted music to humankind, it was natural that music should be the vehicle for communication between the mundane and the heavenly spheres. In many traditions, including the Jewish, the angels and the planets are portrayed as continually praising God through music. This angelic praise then serves as a model for human behavior. Hassidism, a Jewish pietist movement that began in eighteenth-century Poland, emphasized the power of music to elevate the soul. Certain tunes, called *dveykus niggunim*, were sung, often without words, and repeated over and over until the Hassid had entered a trance, and was said to be 'clinging' to God.
- People create songs as a means of intensifying the emotional and dramatic impact of their words. In a wide range of forms, from folksong to madrigal to opera to liturgical chant, composers have used music to heighten the theatricality of a powerful text.
- A text set to music is easier to memorize than one without music. In pre-literate societies, or those in which books are scarce, melody is used as an effective means of assisting the memory.

- In Judaism, the sacred is set off from the profane. Time is divided into sacred and secular, the borderlines between the two are marked with ritual ceremonies. Certain objects, such as a Bible or a prayerbook, are deemed sacred and as such are treated with great reverence. Certain words, such as the Tetragrammaton (God's four-letter name), are considered too sacred for ordinary mortals to pronounce. In like manner, a distinction is drawn between secular and sacred *reading*. The sanctity of the liturgical service is enhanced by the fact that its texts are chanted, not merely spoken. This dialectic is all the more pronounced because this musical repertoire is considered 'exotic' and 'ancient.' This special music has become emblematic of Jewish society's resistance to acculturation, and of clinging to traditional values and practices.

- Anthropologists have speculated that music may have originated as a means of projecting the voice over long distances. Before the development of electronic amplification, the artful use of sustained pitch was recognized as a practical way of amplifying the voice. Where large crowds would assemble to hear one person, singing was more effective than speaking.

- Since ancient times, Jews have adorned their ritual to enhance the pleasure of the liturgical dialogue. Rabbi Tanhuma bar Abba (4th century C.E, Palestine) wrote, "If you have a pleasant voice, chant the [prayers], for it is written, 'Honor the Lord with your wealth' (Proverbs 3.9), i.e, with that [talent] which God has endowed you."

- The Jewish liturgy is organized according to an elaborate system of musical leitmotifs. For example, there is a unique melody, which is used only for the evening service on a Festival. Similarly, the Sabbath evening service, the High Holiday evening service and the weekday evening service are each characterized by their unique melodies. In addition, on any given day in the Jewish calendar, there are different melodies used to distinguish the morning, afternoon and evening services. Music is a symbol used to evoke the special atmosphere of each service and each day. A spoken service lacks these rich calendric cues.

Music as a Banner

Ethnomusicologists remind us that we use music in many different ways. We use music to wake us up in the morning, to relieve loneliness, to entertain us while we are driving, to make it possible for us to dance, to stimulate us to exercise, to relax after an anxious day in the office. We use music to express our feelings, to alter our mood. Some of us also use music as a banner with which to assert our identity. Many Native Americans will make a point of singing their traditional songs at tribal gatherings. In the 1950s, Rock 'n' Roll was a means for white middle-class kids to escape out of what they felt was a boring and restrictive environment. Today, rap music is the vehicle for an expression of anger and frustration. For many Jews, singing certain songs is an act of self-identification as Jews. Singing a synagogue tune can be an act of religious identification a Zionist song, national identification, a Yiddish folksong, cultural identification.

Composers such as Ernest Bloch, Arnold Schoenberg, Leonard Bernstein, and Steve Reich have created works that are overtly Jewish. Bloch's *Schelomo* is saturated with rhythms, modes and motifs drawn from traditional synagogue chant. Schoenberg pays tribute to the martyrs of the Holocaust in his *Survivor from Warsaw*. In his first symphony, Bernstein has taken, note for note, an ancient chant used for cantillating the prophetic books of the Bible in a synagogue service, and developed it with a fascinating angularity and asymmetry. The music to Reich's *Tehilim* was inspired by the sound of Hebrew Psalm texts and Middle Eastern percussion. Composing these works was a Jewish action, whether conscious or subconscious. Listening to them, if the listener has sufficient background to recognize the source material, can stimulate intellectual delight, spiritual uplift, and cultural pride.

Issues of Acculturation

I also use music to teach acculturation. I begin by playing the traditional music used by Russian Jews to chant (cantillate) the Bible, pointing out that, since it is associated with the most ancient and holy Jewish text, this music has been zealously preserved and protected from change since ancient times. I then play a recording of a Yemenite Jew chanting that same passage from the Bible. How can they be different, if each community claims that it has preserved the ancient melodies as they were revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai some 3300 years ago? The answer lies in the fact that, existing as a subculture, it was impossible for Jews to be unaffected by the sounds of the surrounding superculture. Thus each Diaspora community gradually evolved its own musical traditions, based on the ancient melos, but bearing the marks of its geographical host. A less subtle form of acculturation can be heard in those synagogues whose cantors use guitars to accompany a liturgy in the style of Joan Baez, or whose choirs sing hymns borrowed deliberately from Protestant worship.

For many years, America placed a high value on assimilation. Immigrants to this country were pressured into conforming to an imaginary normative cultural ideal. In recent years, however, the model of the 'melting-pot' has given way to a more pluralistic picture of the rainbow, emphasizing the richness of a land in which many diverse cultures coexist. I challenge my students to compare these models with totalitarian and ultra-nationalist societies in which music has served political ends. The treatment of music in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Communist China provide dramatic models for the study of artistic censorship. In that context, we also examine the restrictions on music which have been imposed by Jewish, Christian, and Moslem religious authorities. Of course, music can and should be experienced for its own sake. But music can also be a powerful tool for the exploration of issues relating to religious, cultural, and national identity.

Resources

Books and Articles:

Eisenstein, Judith Kaplan. *Heritage of Music: The Music of the Jewish People*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1973.

Gradenwitz, Peter. *The Music of Israel*. Second edition. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996 (first edition: New York W. W Norton, 1949).

Jacobson, Joshua. "Music in the Holocaust." *The Choral Journal*. December, 1995.

_____. "What is Jewish Liturgical Music?" *The Choral Journal*. September, 1997.

_____. "We Hung up Our Harps: Rabbinic Restrictions on Music." *The Journal of Synagogue Music* . 25 2 (April, 1998).

_____. "What Is Jewish Music?" *The Orff Echo*. 33.3 (Spring 2001).

Nettl, Bruno. *The Study of Ethnomusicology*. Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Recordings of Folksongs and Popular Music:

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

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

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

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

Recordings of Chants:

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

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

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

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.

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

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

Videos:

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

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

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

Websites:

[Ergo Media](#) . (videos).

[The Institute for Jewish Music](#) . (CDs and print anthologies of sacred music traditions).

[The Jewish Music Center at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv](#) . (CDs).

[The Jewish Music Research Center](#) . (research materials).

[Jewish Music Web Center](#) . (links).

[Jew-who](#) . (a listing of prominent Jewish musicians).

[Tara Music](#) . (CDs, books, anthologies, and videos).

[Transcontinental Music Publications](#) . (sheet music).

[World Music Press](#) . (sheet music, anthologies, and educational materials).

[The Zamir Chorale of Boston](#) . (CDs, resources).