

Pursuing Authenticity in Choral Music for the Synagogue

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The issues before a synagogue choir director are not dissimilar to those of any conductor of a choir for the church, with perhaps a couple of distinctions. Like the director of a church choir, the synagogue choral director must be on the lookout for pieces that are accessible for the choir's ability, adaptable to the context (e.g., Does the synagogue use accompanying instruments in services? Is there a cantor and a choir?), and are suitable in terms of the theology and the liturgical season.

However, a primary difference is the question of "authenticity," a slippery slope in any discussion of Jewish music. A choral selection's "Jewishness" has been a point of debate in the American synagogue at least since the late nineteenth century, when the American cantorate first began to organize professionally. Pioneering scholarly work was done by Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, Eric Werner, and others who pointed to results that call into question whether or not there is, in fact, such a thing as true authenticity in Jewish music. Idelsohn's magnificent *Thesaurus* revealed the great diversity of "Jewish" music throughout the Diaspora. Werner's two-volume study, *The Sacred Bridge*, highlighted the parallels between Jewish psalmody and Temple practice with the emerging liturgy of early Christianity.

Complicating this was the spirit of *Has-kalah*,¹ or Jewish enlightenment, which led reform-minded synagogue cantors and composers to fashion Jewish music that reflected Western European common practice. Among these are some of the most prominent and well-known names in Jewish choral music such as Salomon Sulzer and Louis Lewandowski. Sulzer's long life and influence led directly to the first generation of cantor-composers with a similar desire for "Europeanized" Jewish choral music, first-generation cantors such as William Sparger of New York's Temple Emanuel and Alois Kaiser at Oheb Shalom Congregation in Baltimore at the turn of the twentieth century. Choral music traditions in Vienna, Paris, Odessa, Berlin, and other Euro-

pean metropolitan centers began to emphasize the sound of the professional choir and, in most cases, the organ.

Paradoxically, as Jewish choral music "modernized" away from its traditional roots, these same two composers advocated for the awareness and incorporation of traditional Jewish motifs. The long, intertwined history of Jewish music and that of the early Church, the tendency of Jewish music to assimilate musical traits of the larger cultures where Jews resided throughout the Diaspora, and the tension between reform and conservative outlooks makes it easy to understand why the question of "authenticity" is anything but clear. The reason this question is important remains especially crucial to the music of Jewish worship life. Pogroms of various kinds have plagued the Jewish population for centuries. In the modern era, the Nazi's genocide of six million Jews stands out as the most systematic and efficacious attempt to eradicate Jews.

After 1945, Jewish synagogal life became obsessed with preserving a sense of transmission of relevance to ensuing generations. The lessons of the Holocaust and the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in 1948 were present-day themes that were used to impress a younger generation of Baby Boomers in the importance of holding on to Jewish life, not only because of the decimation of European Jewry, but also the phenomenon of assimilation that became more prevalent in the United States throughout the twentieth century. By the 1960s, the synagogue experienced the discontent of youth disenchanted with America's role in Southeast Asia, and its music of discontent was powered by rock and roll and an emphasis on folk music. Finally a "neo-Chassidic" sound, principally driven by charismatic figures such as the late Shlomo Carlebach, fostered a new enthusiasm for a mystical, ecstatic Jewish musical experience. Organs and mixed-voice choirs languished in favor of a more participatory, unison style of singing. The influence of summer camps was another prime mover in this musical awakening to a more traditionally "Jewish" sound. While

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church music has had similar movements, the great concern for Jewish communal survival makes this more than a merely esthetic issue.

So what is authentic? As difficult a question as that is, there are a few traits that can be identified as having near-universal identification with Jewish authenticity, at least within the Eastern European (Ashkenazi) diaspora,² which is the tradition that predominates in Jewish choral music. This article will focus specifically on choral music of a practical nature; there is not space here for the larger question of chant traditions and the genres of music primarily for soloist and accompaniment.

Ashknazic Prayer Modes (Nusach Ha-tefilah)

There are many prayer modes in this tradition, but we will focus here on just three, which are the basis for much of the Sabbath music held through the year. Each of these bears the name of a traditional prayer from the liturgy. Collectively they are also known by the German term “Steiger.”

Ahavah Rabbah (Great love)—a most characteristic “Jewish” sound is the prevalence of the melodic augmented second (Figure 1).

Magein Avot (Shield to the Fathers)—a versatile mode

for non-Western harmonization (Figure 2).

Adonai Malach (The Lord is King)—identical to the Mixolydian church mode, the lowered 7th degree together with the raised 3rd gives this mode its distinct character (Figure 3).

Selected Works

Following is a select and too-short list of choral works for worship utilizing these modes that are all staples of the opening section of the Friday evening Shabbat service (*Kabbalat Shabbat*). All require an experienced cantor/soloist, but the choral demands are quite accessible to a variety of mixed choirs. For every work mentioned, the reader is encouraged to investigate other works within these composers’ services and others who are similar in style.

Heinrich Schalit, “L’chu N’rammoh” from *The Holy Sabbath* (Transcontinental, 1942), a sublime and straightforward example of the Adonai Malach nusach in this setting of Psalm 95. Another beautiful response for choir in this volume is “May the Words” (p. 39), which concludes the Amidah (central set of prayers).

Isidore Freed, “L’cha Dodi” from *Sacred Service for Sabbath Eve* (Transcontinental, 1953). The mystical medieval imagery of the “L’cha Dodi” text has many choral settings, often utilizing the choir only on the refrain. This is a resourceful way for a choir to perform a beautiful work

with a minimum of note learning compared to works with more complex text. Of course, a fine soloist/cantor is essential for the verses. Freed’s setting is set largely in the Magein Avot mode, with a tasteful and appropriate harmonization for both organ and choir.

Ben Steinberg, “Shiru Ladonai” from *Pirchay Shir Kodesh* (Transcontinental, 1963). This setting of Psalm 98 utilizes at least two of the *nuschaot* mentioned above. The composer included refrains for congregational participation and more idiomatically choral passages.

Steinberg, “Shalom Rav,” also from the above volume, is set in a



Figure 1. Ahavah Rabbah (Great Love)



Figure 2. Magein Avot (Shield to the Fathers)



Figure 3. Adonai Malach (The Lord is King)

more contemporary tonal idiom but must be mentioned for its excellent marriage of text and music. This prayer is found near the conclusion of the Amidah, the central set of prayers, in the Friday evening service, and is both charming and relatively undemanding technically for choirs.

Salomon Sulzer, *Schir Zion* (Sacred Music Press/Bloch Publishing Co., 1954). This is a landmark example of a comprehensive setting of music for the Sabbath and the three principal Festival services (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot) and was first published in 1839 by this renowned cantor/composer based in Vienna. Typical of the acculturation found in Diaspora music, and a compendium for Sulzer's ideas of traditional Jewish music within a modern musical framework, the majority of these settings are harmonized in a manner consistent with the early Romantic era. Showing his broad worldview and his acceptance into proper musical society, Sulzer includes here a setting of a Kabbat Shabbat psalm, "Tov Lehodos," composed by his colleague Franz Schubert. From this volume also come many melodies that are widely used and quite familiar to Jewish worshippers. A predominant choral characteristic is Sulzer's setting of syllabic, repeating four-part chords as a choral response to the more expressive cantorial melodies, in the call-and-response form that permeates Jewish liturgical music. A few of the more "traditional" gems here include:

- "Magein Avot," no. 43, which is largely set according to the nusach of the same name.
- Sulzer's setting of Psalm 16, "Shiviti L'negdi," is one of his most beautiful choral compositions. It is rarely heard and will be a joy for choirs of all abilities. Its primary liturgical use is during the memorial service (Yizkor) for the last days of Pesach and Shemini Atzeret and for Yom Kippur. Sulzer published it in *Schir Zion* in the second appendix for funerals ("Bei Begräbnissen).
- Eliezer Gerovitsch, "V'sham'ru" from *Schirej Simroh* (Reprinted by The Sacred Music Press, 1954). In terms of fidelity to the Ashkenazic nuschaot, this cantor/composer from Rostov is exceptional. Avoiding the Westernizing tendencies of the more popular Sulzer, Lewandowski, and Naumburg (in Vienna, Berlin and Paris, respectively), this setting of a part of the Sabbath evening liturgy is frequently a moment of choral/cantorial reflection in the service. "V'sham'ru" is selection no. 8 in this collection.
- Adolf Katchko, *Five Musical Settings of Hashkivenu* (Bloch, 1947). The revered figure of the American cantorate, who was based at New York's Temple Anshe Chesed, published an interesting set of four choral and one cantorial solo setting of this central prayer from the evening services for the Sabbath and Festivals. Each of the choral settings are of fine quality and range in levels of difficulty.
- Ron Nelson, "Cause Us, O Lord our God" (Boosey and Hawkes, SATB and organ) is an example of a work of church music that is an English setting of the "Hashkivenu" prayer that evokes traditional nusach disguised in a more modern American idiom, not unlike Weill's "Kiddush" in Putterman's collection (q. v.). The composer laconically credits "The Book of Worship" as the source of this English version, which is in fact from the Reform movement's *Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship*, first published in 1895 and revised in 1940. While it was largely discontinued in Reform congregations after 1975, it remains a valuable resource of beautifully rendered English translations of the traditional Jewish prayers and was a source for many fine works, including Ernest Bloch's 1936 *Avodath Hakodesh* (Sacred Service) for baritone, chorus, and orchestra. Nelson's work is scored for organ and choir alone, without a cantor/soloist.
- Max Janowski is justly famed for his setting of the High Holy Day prayer "Avinu Malkeinu" ("Our Father, Our King") in the version of *The Union Prayer-Book*, 1940. Other notable choral works for the Sabbath include "Hashkivenu," "Sim Sholom," a setting of "Horiu" (Psalm 100) in C minor for the New Year. Janowski was a first-generation German-Jewish composer based at Chicago's K.A.M. Isaiah Congregation for many years and assimilated beautifully the Ashkenazic style of Jewish music in all its aspects,

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especially the Chassidic melodic tradition and that of traditional cantorial practice (chazzanut). In addition to these fine works, choirs seeking a fresher, technically less demanding setting should consider his later “Hariu” (Psalm 100), newly arranged by Miller and published by Transcontinental Music in 2012, is also a fine work, which requires a cantor/soloist but generally keeps the choir to a unison refrain.

General Traditional Collections of Significance

While the 1954 *Out of Print Classics* setting from Sacred Music Press is the *magnus liber* of the Ashkenazic synagogue tradition, there are other significant American-based collections of “traditional” Jewish choral music:

- Gershon Ephros, ed. *Cantorial Anthology of Traditional and Modern Synagogue Music*, 5 volumes, 1953 (Bloch). A wide variety of composers, both traditional and more contemporary, with choral works that vary in accessibility for mixed choirs, with organ accompaniment and most with extensive cantorial/soloist roles, the five volumes include:

Volume 1: Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

Volume 2: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

Volume 3: Sh’losh Regalim (The Three Festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot)

Volume 4: Shabbat (Sabbath) responses, anthems, hymns

Volume 5: Various daily services and minor holidays (including Chanukah and Purim)

- Abraham Z. Idelsohn, Baruch Kohon, and A. Irma Kohon, *Sefer Shirat Yisrael: Jewish Song Book for the Synagogue* (Cincinnati: Publications for Judaism, 1961). An expansion of Idelsohn’s original 1928 book, this edition published after his death con-

tains a wealth of music arranged for choirs and cantor/soloist with organ for the entire Jewish year and other occasions.

- David J. Putterman, ed. *Synagogue Music by Contemporary Composers* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1951). This is a most unusual collection by renowned composers including Leonard Bernstein, David Diamond, Lukas Foss, Roy Harris, and Darius Milhaud, whom Cantor Putterman, long-time liturgical leader of the Park Avenue Synagogue in music, approached for inclusion in this volume. The musical style is more modernist than traditionally Jewish, and the range of difficulty is predictably diverse. But the collective talent and creativity makes it a valuable resource for synagogue choir directors, especially for special programming. Kurt Weill’s only Jewish composition, a 1951 “Kiddush” (Sanctification over the wine) composed in memory of his father, a German-Jewish cantor, mixes Weill’s blues-based melodic style with hints of the traditional nuschaot.

Arranging Choral Music for Jewish Worship

As mentioned earlier, this article seeks to shed light on a few significant composers of choral music rather than address the vast repertoire of synagogue chant and music overall. But the opportunities to create choral settings of solo works utilizing the “authentic” prayer modes and melodies are plentiful and rewarding. Here are a few resources to consider: Moshe Nathanson, *Zamru Lo*, 3 volumes (Cantors Assembly, 1974). *Zamru Lo* is primarily a compendium of cantorial songs and recitatives rather than works for choir. But a gifted choral musician, by becoming familiar with the nuschaot and studying examples of harmonizing these modes by greats such as Schalit, Ephros, and others, can profitably utilize this trove of melodies in simple choral settings suited to the abilities of the ensemble. The Kappelmeister tradition of Western music is practically a required skill for the resourceful synagogue choral director! A fine resource on the theoretical aspects of harmonizing these melodies

can be found in Isidore Freed, *Harmonizing the Jewish Modes* (Sacred Music Press, 1958). And of course, in the time-honored tradition of the Kappelmeister, the best way to learn this style is to study the great cantor/composers, many of whom are mentioned above.

Lastly, a word about programming choral music in a Jewish service. Any truly effective worship experience is equal parts inspiration, participation, and edification. In terms of the musical portion of the program, one must always balance familiar, participation-oriented responses with more “artful” choral works. In Jewish tradition, the musical leader is the “messenger of the congregation” (shaliach tzibbur)—less an intermediary between the worshipper and God but an “amplifier” of the congregation’s prayers through song. The choir certainly also assists in this role. Creative and balanced programming is among the conductor’s greatest responsibilities and most creative endeavors. But it is one that is also fulfilling and vital to effective synagogue worship. 📌

Select Bibliography

In addition to the musical selections and anthologies cited above, the following resources may be of interest to readers:

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NOTES

¹ N. B. Many of the works discussed in this article were composed in the Ashkenazic dialect of Hebrew, which has largely disappeared from those American Jewish congregations that utilize choral music. Today, the majority of American Jews sing and pray in the Sephardic dialect, a brighter pronunciation typical of the Mediterranean languages from which region it sprung. Choral directors, in choosing many of the works listed here, will need to consider which pronunciation they wish to use and the wishes of the particular congregation, rabbis, cantors, etc. This article generally uses the Sephardic rendition of titles and terminology.

² The two great Diasporas in Jewish history after the destruction of the Second Temple are the Ashkenazic, whose melodies are redolent not only of ancient Jewish psalmody and the biblical chant tradition of ancient Israel but also of the indigenous musics of Eastern and Central Europe. The Jewish community portrayed in “Fiddler on the Roof” and similar stories typify the Jews of this tradition. The Sephardic tradition has a quite different musical sound, although its roots in ancient Israel are similar. Primarily, the Jewish communities surrounding the Mediterranean Sea in Europe, the Iberian peninsula, the Near East, and north Africa are the communities of this musical tradition. In the United States, while the Sephardim were the earliest Jewish communities to settle, the arrival of a vast number of Ashkenazim in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have become the predominant community of the two.