

How New Liturgical Music is Created

Cantor Paul Kowarsky

The first step in the procedure for creating new liturgical music is obviously to choose a text. Then we need to establish at which service the piece will be sung, and whether the particular text is governed by a specific traditional nusach. And if so, what that nusach is.

We make an in-depth study of the selected text, and pay careful attention to our own feelings and attitudes in relation to the text in question. We ascertain to which of the four segments of prayer the text belongs – Petition, Thanksgiving, Praise or Confessional. If the text is not actually governed by a specific nusach, are we going to write the piece in a Major or a Minor key or perhaps a mixture of both or in a particular mode coupled with a minor or a major key component.

Next is to consider whether the piece is for congregational participation exclusively or will it be for Cantor and Choir or a blend of all three.

Oftentimes it is important to take into account the type of person or family by whom the piece has been commissioned, the occasion for which it was commissioned as well as the person in whose honour or memory the music is being composed.

Of absolute paramount importance is that the music must match the words. In other words, the music must not only make sense of the text but also it must bring out the true meaning and the composer's understanding and concept of the text.

It need hardly be said that the composer must write the music in a singable key to enable the participants to sing it comfortably, and the music must ensure that the Hebrew words are correctly pronounced.

In illustrating how new liturgical music is created, I will use some of my own compositions, and compare my treatment of the texts with the treatment of others who have composed music for the same texts. I will do this by analyzing, as we do with poetry, what I believe to have been the composer's understanding and intention. In my analysis I will utilize examples from:

1. Texts governed by nusach;
2. Texts not governed by nusach; and
3. Texts where the music, in my view, does not match, or even distorts, the meaning of the words.

Now that I have completed my analysis, I want to stress certain aspects related to the introduction of new music into our services.

New music should only be introduced gradually into our services so that we always have a blend of old and familiar and new and challenging music. As we build our repertoire, we ought never to lose sight of the fact that we are praying to G-d, and not merely singing songs. So that whatever prayers we sing, we strive to attain the

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highest level of “Kavanah” of “Devotion” which transforms singing into praying. And what we are trying to achieve with the specific prayer will inevitably encompass our moods, feelings, emotions and individual and communal circumstances.

“Nusach Hat’fillah” (the Traditional Prayer Music) is basically made up of a variety of musical modes. According to Macy Nulman in his work entitled: “Encyclopedia of Music of the Synagogue”, synagogue modes are –

A melodic structure of synagogue chants based on the organization of tonal relationships into a series of scales. These prayer modes consist of combinations of melodic patterns within a given scale called nusach.

The nuschaot are sometimes referred to in accordance with some of the prayers at which the Chazen intones these modes. And so we have:

- The Adoshem Malach Mode;
- The Ahavah Rabbah Mode;
- The Magein Avot Mode;
- The Mi Shebeirach Mode; and
- The Vidui Mode.

Attempts have been made by musicologists to compare Synagogue modes to Church modes. However, although there are some connections and similarities, they are in fact significantly different.

The first person known to have named the Synagogue Modes was Cantor Isaac Lachmann in his article called “Unsere Synagogale National Musik” published in “The Jud’sche Kantor” in 1880.

I conclude with the prayer that our congregation will learn the correct, traditional way of chanting and singing the prayers according to the age-old traditional nuschaot.