

Jewish Contributions to the Art of Music

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

How significant was the Jewish contribution to the development of the art of music?

Many of the early Christians were formerly Jews, and brought their Jewish music & melodies into their churches. Research and comparison studies with Gregorian chants have proven conclusively the debt which early church music owes to Ancient Jewish music. This fact impacts upon the entire history and development of the art of music.

Biblical texts inspired the early Italian composers and were the basis for the texts of numerous great choral works such as many of Handel's compositions for choir, Haydn's "The Creation" and Mendelssohn's "Elijah." The influence of Jewish song is clear in the works of many great 19th Century composers: Bruch's Kol Nidrei and "Three Hebrew Melodies"; Mussorgsky's "Joshua", Rimsky Korsakov's song entitled: "Chanson Hebraique," to mention but a few.

After the destruction of the Temple and the ban on instrumental playing at services, Jewish musical talent was found in synagogue singing. Young boys sang in choirs and then became cantors (as did I). Many of the great cantors were admired also by the non-Jewish world. Cantor Israel Lovy (1773-1832) of the Great Synagogue in Paris, was invited by Maximilian Joseph Duke of Bavaria, to sing the tenor part in Haydn's "Creation". Cantor Salomon Sulzer (1844-1890) of Vienna was recognized as the first interpreter of the songs of his friend, Franz Schubert. Franz Liszt's laudatory writings about how moved he was when hearing Sulzer daven, are well-known.

Jewish participation in the musical life of Europe began, however, with the period of Jewish emancipation and the Reform movement in 19th Century Europe. The two most influential Jewish composers of this time were Giacomo Meyerbeer of Berlin, and Jacques Offenbach, whose father was the cantor and rabbi of Cologne. "Queen of Sheba" by Karl Goldmark, son of a cantor in Vienna, and "La Juive" by Jacques Fromental Halevy, of Paris, are two successful 19th Century operas still retained by the grand opera houses of today.

At that time, Jews began to excel as interpreters of the great masters of the musical art. Pianists: Ignatz Moscheles, Carl Tausig, Emil Saver and Anton Rubinstein; violinists: Heinrich Wilhelm Ernest, Joseph Joachim; and cellists: David Popper and Carl Davidoff.

In the United States Jews contributed considerably, towards the fostering of an appreciation of good music. Leopold Damrosch, founded the New York Symphony Orchestra and the New York Oratorio Society. His son, Walter, presented the first American performance of Wagner's "Parsifal", Saint-Saens' "Samson and Delilah", the symphonies of Brahms and Elgar, and Tchaikowky's 6th symphony, "The Pathetique." In 1891 Walter Damrosch helped to dedicate Carnegie Hall with the New York Symphony Orchestra.

The contribution of Jews to the advancement of the operatic art in the United

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States is significant too. Opera impresario, Oscar Hammerstein presented Debussy's "Pelleas et Melisande", and Strauss's "Elektra" and "Salome." As general director of the Metropolitan Opera House in those days, Heinrich Conned did much towards stimulating popular interest in opera.

Outstanding contributions to American music are Bloch's symphonic poem, "America"; Gruenberg's opera "Emperor Jones"; and Gershwin's opera, "Porgy and Bess". And what of the American jazz idiom, developed by such Jews as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and many others too numerous to mention! Yes, our fellow Jews have played a tremendous role in the development of the art of music, and their musical talents are rooted in our sacred synagogue musical heritage.

In November 1998 we honoured the memory of many of those wonderful Jewish musicians when we sang their works at Beth Tzedec's "Grand Night of Song" in honour of Israel's 50th Anniversary. After the High Holidays I will be leaving on a 6-month Sabbatical, visiting many parts of the world, where I hope to learn much about the synagogue practices and programmes of those Jewish Communities. I plan to share some of my experiences with you in a four-part lecture series.

May you all enjoy a healthy and happy New Year, and may we be inscribed in the Book of Life and greet each other on my return erev Pesach.