



## **A Composer's View of Temple Music**

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Now that I am at the biblical age of three score and ten, I take a few moments to look back nostalgically at these many years of my involvement with the synagogue and with Jewish liturgical music. For me, it has been an uplifting experience and one that has ennobled my life and enabled me to become a composer with a center. That center is the deep spiritual message of Judaism. Whether I write a symphony, a concerto, or a setting of sacred text, the great depth of my involvement and the overwhelming experiences I have had with our Torah and our liturgy are the inspiration for my every musical thought. During the past fifty years, I have written musical settings for four complete Friday evening services and a Sabbath morning service, as well as dozens of settings of texts for the High Holydays and the three festivals.

Besides those, it has been my pleasure to have been commissioned to compose large choral and orchestral works based on biblical subjects by organizations such as the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the American Guild of Organists, and many temples and churches. For all these things I am most grateful and feel a great sense of fulfillment. Now that I have reached this stage in my life where I am able to look back, there is only one thing that I regret and that is that, except for the High Holydays, my music is never heard in the Reform synagogues for which it was written. I do not write this in anger, but in sadness. After a lifetime of commitment to the synagogue and its music, I am alive to witness the dumbing down of the music for the synagogue and the complete triumph of the amateur as the composer of music for our liturgy.

We have produced, in the United States, the greatest number of outstanding composers who happen to be Jewish. From Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein to John Zorn and Aaron Kernis, young Jewish men and women are making their mark on American musical culture. All, except possibly Aaron Copland, have written liturgical works. To our great loss, and perhaps I should say to our shame, as a great Reform Movement, few of their works are ever performed or are appreciated by our

rabbis, scholars, and of course, our congregations. Our religious establishment has joyfully embraced the sound and the spirit of popular culture, and the musical sounds pouring forth from our pulpits are either Hasidic ditties, written for people who are musically illiterate, or pop-sounding songs written by musical amateurs to make our congregants feel "warm" rather than get the spiritual high that would result if they were ever confronted with great music. In the past, when the Church dominated Western culture, it encouraged the greatest composers of the time to set its liturgy. When Reform Judaism was born, it tried to do the same, and succeeded in encouraging Jewish composers to come back to the synagogue because it had become friendly to great human creation. However, now, when at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jewish composers throughout the world have come into their own, we are following the Church's example once more and rejecting their work in our services. I mean to say that the Church, all its denominations, is also becoming pop oriented and, by the way, also complains that their attendance figures are way down, as are ours.

I wish the leadership of the Reform Movement would recognize that the music of the synagogue cannot by itself bring people to services, nor should it be the whipping boy for the people who stay away. Most services that I attend, except for the High Holyday services, are attended poorly. Why? Because they often offer nothing-no real sermon to engage the mind, no great music to challenge the meaning of our liturgy, and no attempt to make our congregations feel that "they should know before whom they stand." Nietzsche, in the nineteenth century, said that in the twentieth century aesthetics would supplant religion. Certainly by the twenty-first, that has become a complete reality. The orthodox and fundamentalist movements in all religions can still attract large numbers of people, but we, who pride ourselves as liberals, must admit that more of our people attend the local symphony concert, and even more the local rock concerts, than will ever come to our services.

Again, I say that music would not change the attendance figures, but it could add a spirituality that now does not exist. In 1953, I became music director at Temple Emanu-El of Dallas, Texas. That year, I started a congregational choir that grew from four members to more than eighty. We had as our goal to present the greatest religious music befitting a Reform service. In the early days, we teamed up with area college choirs to present works by Jewish composers that they would never have known without us. We did all the larger works of Bloch, Milhaud, Fromm, Freed, Helfman, Binder, Steinberg, H. Ch. Adler, plus Bach, Handel, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Honegger, Bernstein, Copland, and hundreds of others, especially younger men and women writing for the synagogue. It was an exciting time since we prided ourselves in presenting great music at every service, every week. Here I must add two other facts. We taught some of this music to the congregation so that they could join in. We had a singing and listening congregation that filled the sanctuary. However, it was not only the music that brought them; Rabbi Levi Olan provided a most challenging sermon, which everyone spoke about for the rest of the week. Further, we broadcast a half an hour of sermon and music every Sunday morning; it had the largest listening audience in the Southwest.

Come on now, how can you claim that? Well, I use the following illustration: we recorded five broadcasts at a time. The music for the five broadcasts was recorded on Tuesday evening, whereas the five sermons were recorded whenever the rabbi had the time. Then they were numbered and we never knew the exact broadcast time. On one Easter Sunday morning, our broadcast unfortunately featured a sermon on immortality. The sermon that morning ended with Rabbi Levi Olan saying: "Whether there is immortality or not has to remain an illusive question, since no one ever came back to tell us." If this had been said on any other day, I believe it would have gone rather unnoticed, but because of Easter morning, there was an outpouring of protest. The station received more than seventeen thousand letters and phone calls in one day, and so we really knew that we did not broadcast to an illusive audience. It was my great pleasure to know that these musical activities continued and the choir flourished under the capable leadership of Simon Sargon. However, I recently returned from Dallas, and found out that Simon Sargon had resigned as music director in protest, or to put it less dramatically, because the rabbis no longer wanted the kind of choral music that had been the tradition for the past fifty years. This hurt more than I want to admit, for, to me, this temple was the last outpost that supported the idea of a large congregational choir of high standard leading the congregation in worship. This is what we have come to!

In a recent book, *The Inextinguishable Symphony*, Martin Goldsmith recounts the personal history of his parents meeting in an orchestra sponsored by the Jewish community of Frankfurt. I remember these orchestras and choruses well. My father was very instrumental in the entire movement of the Kulturbund, a Jewish cultural organization that promoted great musical works performed by community members who were banned from German organizations because of the Nazi laws. The Kulturbund kept the Jewish community spiritually enlightened at the darkest times. Usually they would present their concerts in the large temples of Germany and, besides the standard repertory, would perform works especially written on Jewish themes. My father, as well as such composers as Fromm, Janowsky, Schalit, Jospe, and Chajes, among others, wrote works during the early 1930s and enriched our heritage greatly. When my father and the others came to this country, they kept that tradition alive by putting on music festivals featuring compositions by living as well as classical Jewish creators. I remember the yearly festivals in Worcester, Boston, Providence, and those in most major temples throughout the country. I tried to continue the tradition in Dallas, and later in Rochester. These concerts of biblical and liturgical music were attended by very large crowds and elevated the entire field of Jewish liturgical music to its highest pinnacle. These concerts have now been usurped by concerts in which a group of cantors get together, sing a few traditional cantorial chants, and then entertain the audience with Broadway tunes and rock songs. Is this really what we want to promote? When our people were in dire straights during the horrendous years of Nazi reign, they nourished their spirits with the most uplifting music and text, celebrating the finest Jewish creations. Now that we are the freest society ever in Jewish history, do we wish to celebrate that with the lowest of crass musical expressions?

Our movement is training the finest and most professional cantors ever to mount the pulpits of our temples. To what end? Apparently so that they can lead our congregants in the same little Hasidic tunes or our popish camp songs that are to inspire spirituality. Does anyone ever listen to what these tunes sound like when sung by a congregation not led by a choir? They are tired and dreary when they are actually supposed to sound joyful and triumphant. Mel Powell, the great composer and jazz pianist, once said something we need to emphasize when we speak about folk music in the synagogue. "It is reprehensible to call the unadorned colloquial sacred." Yes, I do not mind using tunes traditional to all the many ethnic Jewish groups in our tradition, but they should be arranged and harmonized by the finest composers of our day. Then they become an artistic part of our liturgy and will be able to inspire people when they sing them as well as when they listen to them. It is important, in this connection, to reiterate that I am all in favor of congregational singing, but at the same time, I am in favor of a balance between that kind of participation and listening to a great piece of music set, for example, for the text of Hashkiveinu or R'tzei. The only way we can regain a sense of greatness and awe in our services is to encourage our congregants to join a choir and for that choir to be well trained by a professional who can lead the congregation in singing in an uplifting, not turgid, way. The congregation should be presented also with challenging settings of our great liturgy upon which it can meditate and feel connected to the Holy One.

Two years ago, I was invited to attend a youth camp run by the Lutheran Church. The youngsters gathered around a campfire just like ours and prayed and sang the same types of songs we did; but there was a big change from our typical camps. They formed choirs and learned how to perform the greatest music in their tradition- the music of Bach, Brahms, and the many composers of the twentieth century, such as Britten, Vaughn-Williams, Randall Thompson, and Jean Berger. Their formal services were filled with congregational songs and choirs singing the settings of biblical verses and liturgy. It was an inspiring experience that these youngsters took back to their churches. I believe that if we use that model in our camps, our congregational singing, as well as our appreciation of great Jewish music will relieve the hunger and fulfill the demand for a new and much more effective service in the future.

I began by asking for indulgence so that I could be a bit nostalgic about the many years I have spent in the pursuit of the highest standard in Jewish music. Now, I want to express the hope, at this moment, which I see as a very low ebb in the field, that those of us who care deeply about our spiritual musical heritage will find a receptive ear among our rabbinical and cantorial leadership, and that I will be remembered for something other than having provided the musical setting of *HaMotzie*.