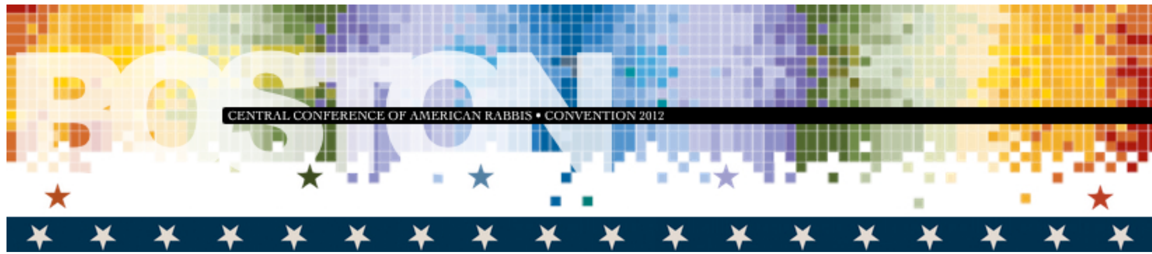

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The Music You Won't Hear on Rosh Hashana

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TODAY is the first day of Rosh Hashana, the holiday that marks the beginning of the Jewish new year. For the next 10 days, through Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Jews around the world will gather to chant the prayers of the High Holy Days to melodies that have been used for generations.

Some of the melodies will be simple and some complex, and some will be particularly beautiful. What almost none of them will be is ''classical'': Western classical composition, the dominant feature of Christian sacred music for more than a millennium, remains mostly absent from Jewish liturgical music. Given the number of extraordinary Jewish classical composers over the last two centuries, this absence is particularly striking.

But it's not surprising. The reasons for the dearth of classical music in the synagogue may be tangled, but they all lie in the familiar ground of Jewish history and experience: religious observance, rabbinic law, social and legal exclusion, systematic

persecution, love of tradition -- and the complicated psychology of being Jewish in a largely gentile world.

Western classical music has various ancient antecedents, including, interestingly, the early music of the Jewish liturgy. But its modern history begins in the Middle Ages with music written for the Roman Catholic Church. And to a large extent it owes its subsequent evolution to the work of musicians trained and employed by the church, the great patron not just of musicians but of artists, scribes and scholars. It's true that secular musical forms, training and traditions developed along the way, and throughout history one finds great contrasts in style and emphasis between sacred and secular forms in classical music.

But in terms of classical music's basic principles, the similarities outweigh the differences: Bach is still Bach and Mozart is still Mozart, whether in Masses or sonatas. The language of classical music, in other words, is the language of Christian church music.

Jews, however, were long excluded from the practice of Western classical music. Jews were barred from church schools, of course, but until the Italian Renaissance, and the later Enlightenment in other parts of Europe, they were likewise forbidden from public academies, organizations and functions.

As a result, Jews were for the most part limited to cultivating and preserving their own liturgical music, music for the synagogue and home prayer based on ancient chants and motifs -- and enriched over the centuries of the diaspora by borrowing from the folk music of local cultures. From the 12th century to the 14th century, for example, elements of German, Spanish and French folk tunes all found their way, modified and adapted, into Jewish liturgical melodies.

Rabbinic law tightened the limits still further by banning musical instruments in the synagogue -- and outside the synagogue, except during weddings. This prohibition dated from the destruction of the Second Temple, in A.D. 70, after which rabbis decided that the playing of musical instruments was inappropriate for a people in mourning.

But explanations based on historical exclusion and rabbinic law go only so far. What kept emancipated Jewish ''classical'' composers of the modern era from writing music for the synagogue, as their Christian colleagues wrote for the church? Where are the liturgical contributions of Salomone Rossi, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Jacques Offenbach, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, Erich Korngold and Aaron Copland, to name just a few?

The answers rest in the eternal dual longings of the Jewish people: the longing, on the one hand, for distinction, separateness and ''chosenness,'' and on the other for acceptance and belonging.

These forces are always in conflict, but in the field of music, when Jewish composers were finally free from prohibitions and persecution and began to develop their talents within the cultural mainstream, their longing for acceptance triumphed.

In a way, they were still able to remain separate, or ''chosen,'' if only by becoming musicians, members of a rarified profession. But in the thrill of their new freedom they sought the broadest possible citizenship, eagerly choosing to write for their countries, or for the whole world, rather than for the much narrower world of their co-religionists, and to define themselves by their secular accomplishments.

Rossi, for example, did publish a collection of settings of Hebrew texts, but he's better known, and plays a more important role in music history, as an innovator in early Baroque instrumental music and violin technique.

Meyerbeer and Offenbach, both German Jews, became more French than the French -- Meyerbeer as the king of French grand opera, Offenbach as the champion of operetta. Mahler, who went so far as to convert to Catholicism, was a giant of the symphony, and Korngold held similar sway over film music. Copland came to define American classical music and Schoenberg, although he did write works on Jewish subjects, including a setting for the Kol Nidre, the opening prayer recitation for the Yom Kippur service, will forever be identified with his internationally influential system of twelve-tone music.

It's certainly strange that their very liberation as Jews led to composers' leaving the substance of Judaism behind, at least artistically. But is it realistic to expect brilliant Jewish composers, exposed to some of the most magnificent artistic creations of Western civilization and struck by the universal impact and appeal of those creations, to be satisfied setting Hebrew texts for their local congregations?

Yes, it's possible that if some of these great composers had written monumental works for the synagogue, those works might eventually have found a broad public. And some have: Ernest Bloch's ''Avodath Hakodesh'' (''Sacred Service''), for example, is widely performed -- in concert halls more than synagogues -- and Leonard Bernstein's settings of Hebrew texts have not lacked for mixed audiences.

More recently, contemporary Jewish composers like Paul Schoenfield, Osvaldo Golijov and Max Raimi have made compelling use of traditional Jewish tunes and styles in music for the concert hall and found a sizeable audience.

But historically speaking, many Jewish composers simply felt compelled to strike out well beyond their parochial origins, and to avoid at all costs the possibility of being pigeon-holed as composers of ''Jewish music.''

STILL, the interests of Jewish musicians are only a part of the story. Perhaps even more important, many Jewish congregations over the years weren't particularly

interested in changing their traditional musical practices in any fundamental way -- and in most cases still aren't.

Under the pressures of the diaspora and persecution, ''home'' has often been a fluid and elusive concept for Jews, a dream more than a reality. But if the forms of worship remain the same, if the music remains the same, then any synagogue anywhere can still feel like home.
This isn't to say that musical beauty in the synagogue is not highly prized. The Jews tend to have a deep appreciation, for example, for great cantorial singing, and many synagogues have fine choirs. It's also true that many distinguished Jewish composers have set liturgical texts to music -- the names Darius Milhaud, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco and Hugo Weisgall come quickly to mind -- and there's no diminishing their accomplishments or contributions.

Nevertheless, it's safe to say that despite its undeniable artistic quality, most of this music hasn't caught on in any widespread way in Jewish liturgical practice, and certainly hasn't replaced the age-old chants as the most comfortable and familiar way for most observant Jews to communicate with the Almighty.

When it comes to music for the synagogue, invention and innovation have simply not proved as important to the Jewish community as tradition and continuity. Whether this is a good thing is an open question. But if nothing else, it's a testament to the enduring power of music itself, and to the role it has played in sustaining a faith and a people.

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