

Psalms and Songs: **Jewish Choral Music**

Multicultural Concert, May 11, 1997

Psalms and Songs celebrates the rich traditions of Jewish music. Music has been an important part of Jewish life and culture since Biblical times and the Scriptures are replete with references to music and musicians. Jewish musicians already had a wide reputation even in Biblical times. A commemorative stele excavated on the site of the Assyrian capital Nineveh relates that tribute sent to Sennacherib by Hezekiah, King of Judah, included musicians. The story is told that the apostle Thomas found Jewish musicians already there when he arrived to preach in India.

When we think of sacred Jewish music, the Psalms immediately come to mind, a collection of 150 sacred hymns and poems. Many of the Psalms are prefaced with inscriptions suggesting instrumentation or performance practice, but the exact nature of their performance (and even the meaning of key words in those inscriptions) are speculative. The Jewish musical traditions have largely been oral even well into historical times. The first written descriptions apart from the Scriptures come from the Jewish historian Josephus, himself a trained temple musician, and date from the first century C.E. There are tantalizing glimpses into historical music, such as the sacred music of the 17th century Jewish-Italian composer Salamone Rossi, but it was really only in the 19th century that classically trained cantors like Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894) and Salomon Sulzer (1804-1890), a noted composer and a friend of Franz Schubert as well as an influential musical reformer, undertook compilations and collections of cantoral music. There is a strong Philadelphia connection to Jewish musical scholarship as well. One of the most extensive collections of Jewish musical materials was assembled by the cantor and scholar Eric Mandell (1902-1984) and is housed in the Schreiber Music Library of Gratz College in Melrose Park.

About half of the Psalms are explicitly attributed to David the King, whose earliest fame was as a musician. He was brought as a young boy to King Saul, where his singing and playing was the only thing which could lighten Saul's black moods. David is one of the most human and sympathetic characters in the Scriptures. He was exuberant and impetuous, capable of both great deeds and base acts, a man who knew both great happiness and terrible sorrow, but above all had unshakable faith. This range of human emotion and experience is reflected in the Psalms, with their songs of rejoicing, praise, thanksgiving, supplication, and lamentation.

Psalm Settings

The concert opens with *Three Canticles for Chorus*, Psalm settings by Cantor Charles Davidson of the Adath Jeshurun congregation. Psalm 67 recalls the blessing that the Lord

gave to Moses to bless the Israelite people: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you." The second canticle is taken from Psalm 25, a psalm of David which is a prayer for divine guidance and deliverance. Psalm 96 is a joyous hymn of praise.

Joseph Myerov, composer-in-residence of the Beth Sholom congregation, has provided a setting in Hebrew of *Psalm 150*, the last of the Psalms, an exuberant hymn of praise constructed around a single word: Hal'luhu (Praise the Lord)! *Ose Shalom* is the concluding verse of the Kaddish, the traditional prayer recited in remembrance of the dead, and the only verse in Hebrew (the rest of the Kaddish is Aramaic). Liturgically, it is used to conclude each part of the worship service.

Ariel (Visions of Isaiah)

Composer Robert Starer was born in Vienna in 1924 and was one of the youngest students to enter the State Academy of Music. After the annexation of Austria in 1938, his parents sent Starer to Jerusalem to study at the Palestine Conservatoire. While in Palestine he supported himself variously as an accompanist, harpist and transcriber of traditional Middle Eastern music for the oud. During World War II he served in the British Air Force and after the war moved to New York for graduate study at [Juilliard](#). He taught at Juilliard from 1949-1974 and at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York from 1963-1991, where he was named Distinguished Professor in 1986. He has received numerous awards including two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Fulbright Fellowship, the Medal of Honor for Science and Art awarded by the President of Austria and an Honorary Doctorate from the State University of New York. He was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1994.

Starer's works include major orchestral pieces, chamber music, choral music, operas and ballets. His music has been performed by major orchestras under conductors including Mitropoulos, Bernstein, Mehta and William Steinberg, for whom he composed *Journals of a Songmaker*. A recording of his *Violin Concerto* with Itzhak Perlman and the Boston Symphony under Seiji Ozawa was nominated for a Grammy Award. He created several ballets for Martha Graham including *Samson Agonistes* and *Phaedra*. Starer is also a talented writer and has a textbook, *Rhythmic Training*, his autobiography *Continuo, A Life in Music*, and a novel, *The Music Teacher*, to his credit.

Ariel (Visions of Isaiah) was composed in 1959 on a commission from the Interracial Fellowship Chorus of New York and received its premiere in Town Hall the next year. Ariel, literally "the lion of G-d", is a metaphor for Jerusalem, the city captured by David and made by him into the capital of the Jewish monarchy and resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, but it can also be understood in a wider sense to refer to the whole of the Israelite people. As the title suggests, the text was chosen from the writings of the prophet Isaiah, who is known not only for his denunciations and apocalyptic prophecies on the fate of those who had strayed from the Lord but also for his Messianic prophecies.

Historical Background

Isaiah lived in the 8th century B.C.E., when the Jewish monarchy had long been divided into rival kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In addition to the internecine clashes between Israel and Judah, both kingdoms were continually pressed by their immediate neighbors, the Philistines, a loose confederation of city-states along the seacoast and the kingdom of Aram (present day Syria). They were also contested by the two superpowers of the time, Egypt and Assyria. The politics of both Jewish kingdoms were dominated by continually shifting sets of alliances with their neighbors in a mostly vain attempt to play them off against each other. The alliances were cemented with marriages and cultural exchanges, and the worship of false gods was continually imported into Judah and Israel. In response, the Lord sent prophets to admonish and advise the kings (when they would listen) and lead the people back to the Lord.

At the time of Isaiah, King Ahaz of Judah had fallen into idolatry while Judah had suffered greatly at the hands of the Arameans, the Philistines and even the kingdom of Israel. Rejecting Isaiah's advice to trust in the Lord, Ahaz instead had unwisely sought an alliance with Assyria, but the Assyrian king exacted tribute instead. In his desperation, he even melted down the temple vessels to make idols of the gods of Aram. When Hezekiah acceded to the throne, he overturned his father's policies and undertook a great religious reform with the support of Isaiah, destroying the pagan temples and gods, and reconsecrating the Jewish temples. He made attempts at rapprochement with the northern kingdom, inviting the people of Israel to come to Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover. Politically, Hezekiah allied himself with a pro-Egyptian coalition that sought to overthrow the power of Assyria. Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, invaded Judah and forced Hezekiah to pay a heavy tribute in gold and silver (and the aforementioned musicians). Hezekiah, however, remained faithful to the Lord (and also to the pro-Egyptian party) and Sennacherib invaded again, besieging Jerusalem. Hezekiah defied Sennacherib on the advice of Isaiah, who assured him that the Lord would deliver them from the Assyrians. The Lord sent an angel who slaughtered Sennacherib's entire army in the space of a single night, and Jerusalem was saved. (The Greek historian Herodotus independently recorded the destruction of Sennacherib's army, attributing it to a plague of field mice. Modern historians suggest plague as the proximal cause.) The destruction of Sennacherib's army ultimately broke the power of Assyria in the region and Sennacherib himself was assassinated by his own son upon his return to Nineveh. The respite for Judah and Israel was short-lived, however, for the waning of Assyrian power allowed the rise of Babylonia, which supplanted Assyria as a superpower and ultimately brought about the destruction of the Jewish monarchy.

Starer's Setting

Ariel begins with some of the most dire of Isaiah's prophecies punctuated by the recurring phrase "Woe to Ariel." In the second movement, the baritone, representing Isaiah, warns the people of their impending doom. The people echo Isaiah's warning with an ostinato "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field," but seem

strangely detached and unconcerned, as if they do not take Isaiah seriously. The third movement is a wonderfully vivid depiction of the daughters of Zion mincing about in their finery. Because of the nearly continuous warfare during Ahaz's reign, there was a substantial imbalance in the numbers of men and women, and the women went to great lengths to compete for the remaining men, even at the expense of their modesty.

The fourth movement provides the dramatic climax. It opens with an ominous 12-tone chord and the whispered text "Fear, and the pit, and the snare are upon thee." After a lament sung by the soprano solo, each voice part in the chorus takes a different and independent line representing the different responses to the impending disaster, an effect rather like asides in opera, but one which builds to a frenetic climax. After an orchestral interlude, Isaiah returns with words of hope and consolation. The fifth movement is a beautifully lyrical *a cappella* double chorus which continues the theme of hope and consolation. The final movement is an exuberant hymn of praise.

Mendelssohn Choruses

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) has a somewhat ambivalent place as far as Jewish music goes. He was the grandson of the great Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, but he himself was raised in the Lutheran church. His father had him baptized when he was seven and later converted himself, largely to provide more opportunities for his son's talent. And what an enormous talent it was. He was a child prodigy both as a performer and composer, so much so that he was called "another Mozart." He was a virtuoso performer on the piano and organ and concertized extensively. His compositions were (and still are) extraordinarily popular and one is still taken with the freshness of such youthful works as his *Octet for Strings* and the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He was no less esteemed as a conductor. He organized and conducted a landmark revival of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* which reawakened the interest in Bach's choral music. He turned the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra into not only one of the premiere ensembles in Europe but also the first fully professional orchestra. He also founded the Leipzig Conservatory, the first such institution in Germany dedicated to training musicians.

Mendelssohn had long been contemplating an oratorio based on the prophet Elijah, and took the opportunity when he received a commission from the Birmingham (England) Festival in 1846. He conducted the premiere himself and it was an enormous success, becoming not only one of his most enduring works but also one of the most popular oratorios, along with *Messiah* and *The Creation*. Although Elijah lived about 150 years before the time of Isaiah, the situation he faced was quite similar. Ahab, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, had married Jezebel, daughter of the king of the Phoenician city of Sidon, and had imported the worship of the false god Baal. In one of the most dramatic stories in the Scriptures, Elijah challenged the priests of Baal to call down fire to ignite a sacrificial offering, taunting them when they failed. He then called upon the Lord, who not only sent down fire but followed it by rain to end a three-year drought. Elijah had the priests of Baal taken and killed, upbraiding Ahab for his faithlessness. Jezebel, sensing a challenge to Ahab's authority, stirred up the people against Elijah and he was forced to flee into the desert. Elijah was in despair and begged the Lord to take his

life, but the Lord instead sent angels to comfort and strengthen him for a return to his ministry in the first of the two choruses programmed for this afternoon, "He watching over Israel." The second is the final chorus from Elijah, which ends with a magnificent fugue in praise of the Lord.

Folk Songs

The program ends with traditional folk songs. *Tumbalalaika* is a riddle song in which a young man poses three riddles and a young woman is quick to provide the answers. *Rozhinkes mit mandlen* is a lullaby based on an old folk melody but popularized in a musical play by Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908), the father of Yiddish theater. *Rounds of Israel* is a medley of three tradition folk songs (*Shalom Chaverim*, *Kum Bachur Atsei* and *Hiney Matov*) which, as the name implies, are sung as rounds.

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[Program Notes by Michael Moore](#)