

# Studies in Jewish Civilization

*I Will Sing and Make Music:  
Jewish Music and Musicians  
Throughout the Ages*

Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon

# Jewish Music: What Is That?

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When we talk about racial profiling, we are usually referring to what happens at airports to passengers wearing turbans or to African Americans who get pulled over for driving in white neighborhoods. But I am talking about something quite different. I would like to consider racial profiling in the evaluation of a musical performance. One of the finest contemporary klezmer musicians is Don Byron, an African American clarinetist who played for years in the Klezmer Conservatory Band. Can someone who was not immersed in the klezmer traditions as a child perform convincingly? Byron's performance of "Der Nayer Doyne" sounds authentic in every parameter.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s there was a popular advertising slogan, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levi's rye bread." We could certainly build on that concept to say, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Jewish music." But let us probe a little deeper. Do you have to be Jewish to compose Jewish music? Do you have to be Jewish to perform Jewish music? Do people who were steeped in a tradition from childhood listen to music from that tradition differently than those from a different background? To probe even further, we could ask, is Jewishness a product of nature or nurture? Does DNA somehow affect one's behavior, regardless of the environment in which one was raised?

Ernest Bloch is considered to be one of the greatest composers of concert music based on Jewish themes. In 1916, Bloch told an interviewer: "Racial consciousness is something that every great artist must have....A composer who says something is not only himself. He is his forefathers! He is his people!"<sup>2</sup> And one year later, Bloch wrote: "A work of art is the soul of a race speaking through the voice of the prophet in whom it has become incarnate."<sup>3</sup> In other words, Bloch assumed that his best music sounded Jewish because of something genetic, the voice of his ancestors somehow being channeled through his pen. Indeed, five years earlier, he had admitted to his friend Edmond Fleg, "I notice here and there themes that are without my willing it, for the greater part Jewish....It is really strange...this impulse that has chosen me, who all my life have been a stranger to all that is Jewish."<sup>4</sup> Bloch was saying that it was not his

upbringing that resulted in his creating what we might call Jewish music; it was something bubbling up from his racial roots. One can certainly hear the Ashkenazic Jewish melos in Bloch's brooding *Schelomo* for cello and orchestra.<sup>5</sup>

Let's turn to another great twentieth century composer who produced numerous compositions based on Jewish themes. In his senior thesis at Harvard College in 1939, Leonard Bernstein wrote, "It is easily understandable that a composer...whose parents were immigrants, still maintains a close contact with the old racial traditions. If the traditions are part of his childhood, they are inevitably part of his life."<sup>6</sup> Now we might call "traditions that are part of your childhood" the product of nurturing, or perhaps culture. But the young Bernstein labeled them "racial traditions." Bernstein's own "racial traditions" can be heard in his first symphony, *Jeremiah*.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time that Bernstein was positing his racial musical thesis, a similar sentiment was being expressed across the Atlantic. Under the stewardship of Joseph Göbbels, the German Ministry of Culture had decreed that any music composed by a Jew, indeed, any music performed by a Jew, was degenerate, a perversion of the superior Aryan culture. All such music would be censored in the expanding lands of the Third Reich.

And, of course, the Nazis viewed Judaism as a race. A person was considered Jewish if even one of his or her grandparents was Jewish. So Felix Mendelssohn, who had converted to Protestantism at age seven, was still considered a Jew. Mendelssohn's oratorio, *St. Paul*, was considered Jewish Music. German history books were revised to portray Mendelssohn as an unoriginal second-rate hack whose rich Jewish parents had bought him his fame. His sheet music was recalled and destroyed. His recordings were removed from the shelves of music stores and libraries. Programmers of radio broadcasts and live concerts had to ensure that Mendelssohn's music would never be heard again.

On March 16, 1933, the German government informed the great conductor Bruno Walter that he would no longer be allowed to rehearse or perform with his orchestra, the Leipzig Gewandhaus. And then four days later Walter was prevented from guest conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. The reason? Walter had been born to Jewish parents. According to the racial theories, Walter's interpretation of German music would sound different from that of a "pure-blooded" German conductor. We may listen to two recordings of Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony: one conducted by

the Jew Bruno Walter and the other by Wilhelm Furtwängler, who served as vice-president of the Nazi party's Department of Music.<sup>8</sup> Does one sound Jewish and the other sound Aryan?

Nazi policy had its inspiration in the writings of that great nineteenth century German opera composer, Richard Wagner. In 1850, Wagner published an essay, titled "Das Judenthum in der Musik" [Jewishness in Music]. He wrote:

The Jew speaks the language of the nation in whose midst he dwells from generation to generation, but he speaks it always as an alien...Our whole European art and civilization have remained to the Jew a foreign tongue...Throughout an intercourse of two millennia with European nations, culture has not succeeded in breaking the remarkable stubbornness of the Jewish nature as regards the peculiarities of Semitic pronunciation...Now, if the above-mentioned qualities of his dialect make the Jew almost incapable of giving artistic enunciation to his feelings through speech,...in song...the peculiarity of the Jewish nature attains for us its climax of distastefulness.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, there must be some racial characteristic in the Jew that prevents acculturation. Anything composed or performed by a Jew will inevitably have a "Yiddish accent."

We may look at two interesting Jewish reactions to Wagner and his Nazi admirers. Russian-born composer Lazare Saminsky responded to Wagner with his own bit of racial snobbery. Wagner wrote that Jews had polluted the pure music of Europe. Saminsky countered that it was just the opposite: Europe had polluted the pure music of the ancient Hebrews: "We have come to realize that the Jewish people did not judaize the 'Aryan-pure' music of the West. Just the opposite, Jewish music has been itself 'aryanized' or 'contaminated,' partly Europeanized, partly orientalized in the Exile."<sup>10</sup> Saminsky argued for the creation of new music based on the traditional melodies of cantillation, chanting the Hebrew Bible, which he considered to be the best-preserved music from Ancient Israel.<sup>11</sup>

And the great composer Arnold Schoenberg responded to the Nazis with his own form of racial pride. In 1933, after being told by German music critics that he was not a real German, he wrote, "We [Jews] are Asians, and nothing of real substance connects us with the West." Perhaps Schoenberg's music does breathe the air of a different continent.<sup>12</sup>

Is Jewish a race? Recently, when I had to fill out a racial survey of my academic department for the Office of Affirmative Action, I listed myself as “white.” But I really wanted to follow Schoenberg’s lead and check the “Asian” box.

Is Judaism a race or a religion? We are now going to turn our attention to religious profiling. Years ago, I conducted Handel’s *Messiah* for the first time at Northeastern University. After the concert, one of the students in the chorus said to me, “How can a Jew like you conduct Handel’s *Messiah*?” I stammered something about a musical performer being like an actor: “I assume a persona while I am on stage, then I go back to being myself.” But maybe the student had a point. Take three conductors of equal musical competence—one is a devout Christian, another is a devout agnostic, and the third is a devout Jew. Which of the three will deliver a performance of Handel’s *Messiah* that best represents the sentiments of the composer? And which of the three would be the best interpreter of Bloch’s Jewish oratorio, *Avodat Ha-Kodesh*? Who would perform the best rendition of a memorial prayer for the victims of the Shoah—a Jewish *khazn* [cantor] or a Pavarotti? These are tough questions, without obvious answers.

Furthermore, these conundrums raise even more questions. If we define Judaism as a religion, then Jewish music would be the music that is used in sacred rituals. But some of the music heard in our synagogues has been borrowed from non-Jewish sources, both secular and sacred. How much of the music we hear in the synagogue actually has pure Jewish origins? Is there such a thing as pure Jewish origins?

In the twelfth century, Rabbi Yehudah He-Hasid wrote, “In the case of a hymn composed by a priest for worship in a non-Jewish service, even if a Jew considers it to be a beautiful form of praise, he should not chant it to God in Hebrew.”<sup>13</sup>

And the sixteenth century Italian Rabbi Samuel Archivolti wrote, “What can we say? How can we justify the actions of a few cantors of our day, who chant the holy prayers to the tunes of popular secular songs? While reading sacred texts they are thinking of obscenities and lewd things.”<sup>14</sup>

This practice of “contrafaction,”—removing a melody from its original context and applying it to a new text—continues to be quite widespread in synagogues. I attended Shabbat services at a Chabad synagogue recently and heard *Ho-aderes veho-emunoh lekhay olomim* sung quite lustily to the tune of the French national anthem, “The Marseillaise.” And in various

synagogues, I have heard “Adon Olam” sung to the tune of “Silent Night” (on December 25), “Yankee Doodle” (on July 4), and “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” (during the World Series).

But not all authorities disapproved of contrafaction. More than four hundred years ago, in Tsefat, Rabbi Israel Najara was writing Hebrew sacred lyrics to be sung to melodies of then-popular Arab and Turkish love songs. His intention was to distract young people from the secular world, allowing them to sing their favorite tunes, but with new, uplifting Jewish lyrics. His collection, *Shirey Yisrael*, was published in 1587. Among the songs in this collection was the Shabbat table song, “Yah Ribbon ‘Alam,” still popular today, but originally sung to a popular Arab melody.

Assuming that this process of transfusion has been going on for centuries, perhaps millennia, it could be extremely difficult to identify what is “pure” Jewish music. Indeed, when he was asked what Jewish music is, composer Bloch said in 1916: “That I can’t tell you. But it is something that both you and I can recognize and feel, even if we cannot analyze it.”<sup>15</sup> Is that a cop out? It is reminiscent of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964 trying to explain what is obscene by saying, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced...but I know it when I see it.”

Must we rely only on our intuition to define Jewish Music? There would be some problems. The sound of Yemenite Jews singing “Kol Nidre” might not sound very “Jewish” to Bloch. But then our Ashkenazic “Kol Nidre” would not resonate with a Jew from Yemen. There are many different Jewish cultures; not all of them are from Eastern Europe.

Is there a universal Jewish culture? Are there characteristics shared by Jews from Yemen and Switzerland, Morocco and Germany? Some have said that the culture of the Judean Diaspora is tinged with a certain sadness, a feeling of otherness, alienation. The Russian composer, Dmitri Shostakovich, wrote, “Jewish folk music has made a most powerful impression on me....It can appear to be happy while it is tragic. It’s almost always laughter through tears.”<sup>16</sup> One can easily hear that sadness and alienation in the music of Gustav Mahler.<sup>17</sup> But certainly not all music of the Jewish Diaspora is sad. And certainly other nations have produced sad music; melancholy is not a Jewish monopoly.

If we reject descriptions that involve emotion or intuition, is it possible to come up with an objective definition of Jewish music? Let us start with the category of music called “traditional”—music whose

composer is anonymous, music that is presumed to be of some antiquity, indigenous music that is sung by and associated with a particular ethnicity or nationality or folk. Not music of a person, but music of a people.

For many centuries, Jews considered their Bible to be the literal word of God. No human could alter any of those words. Jews preserved them quite faithfully in oral and later in written form. Many Jews also believed that the melodies to which they chanted the words of the Bible were God-given. And so Jews preserved these melodies from change, as best they could. These melodies for chanting the Bible, called "cantillation," are found in some form or another in virtually every Jewish community. Of all Jewish musical artifacts they are probably the best preserved from the ancient past.<sup>18</sup>

Secular music can also be traditional. In some communities, Jews sang the same secular songs as their neighbors. But in others, they developed their own unique indigenous repertoire of lullabies, love songs, work songs, and so forth. Passed down from generation to generation, many of these songs endured, but, of course, changing slightly in the course of each transmission.

Sometimes, one national group appropriates a traditional song from another group. The melody of the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah," is actually based on "Carul Cu Boi," a Moldavian folk song about a cart and its oxen. In 1882, Samuel Cohen, a Moldavian farmer who had immigrated to Palestine, took the melody of "Carul Cu Boi," which he knew well from his childhood and fit it to the words of a poem that he had recently heard when the poet Naftali Hertz Imber was visiting his community. I dare say that today more people would associate that melody with Israel than with Moldavia.

In the case of traditional music we could define Jewish Music as music that has been used by Jews more than by others—and therefore has become associated with Jews and therefore is more meaningful to Jews than to non-Jews. But we must keep in mind that what is traditional to a Yemenite Jew may be quite alien to a German Jew.

And what about composed music? I would suggest that if the composer has, either consciously or unconsciously, incorporated traditional Jewish elements (the ones we just defined), then we might consider the resultant work to be Jewish. So to be considered Jewish, a composition would have a Jewish text, a Jewish descriptive title or program, or would utilize melodies or characteristic scales of traditional Jewish music.

In 1942, Bernstein set out to compose a symphony about the Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah. In doing so, he deliberately utilized the traditional motifs used by Eastern European Jews for chanting the book of Jeremiah.<sup>19</sup> Anyone who is familiar with that tradition would probably recognize that the second movement of the symphony is based on traditional *haftarah* cantillation. But without the benefit of program notes, a listener lacking in that cultural literacy would simply identify this as a symphonic work, perhaps an American symphonic work. In other words, one person's Jewish music is another person's "classical music by a dead white guy." This phenomenon suggests another possible definition of Jewish music: One person's conscious effort to express Jewish identity through artistic composition.

Perhaps any music that describes Jews could be considered Jewish music. In 1874, the Russian (non-Jewish) composer Modest Mussorgsky composed a tone poem called *Pictures at an Exhibition*, based on pictures that he had seen at a memorial exhibit of the artist Viktor Hartmann. Included in the exhibition were two pictures, titled "Samuel Goldenberg" and "Schmuyele." One section of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, titled "Two Jews," is an attempt to portray Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyele as Jews through musical tones.<sup>20</sup>

If we are listening to vocal music, we can ask whether the composer has used a Jewish text. But how can a text be Jewish? Perhaps, it is in a language spoken uniquely by Jews, such as Hebrew, Yiddish, or Ladino. Perhaps, it is taken from the Jewish liturgy or elsewhere in the Jewish literary canon. Perhaps, it is a narrative about Jews, such as (non-Jewish composer) George F. Handel's oratorio, *Judas Maccabaeus*, a work that was banned under the Nazi regime because of its Jewish associations.

We can reject the notion that an artifact must be considered Jewish music simply because its composer was identified as a Jew. The song "White Christmas" does not qualify as Jewish simply because Irving Berlin (né Israel Baline) was Jewish.

But perhaps, after all of this, we are still left with a theory of relativity: Jewishness in music lies in the ears of the beholder. Jewish Music is defined not by anything objective, intrinsic to its nature, but by how it is perceived, how it is received. So perhaps we do need to go back to Bloch's statement, nebulous, but very true, "I can't tell you [what Jewish Music is]. But it is something that both you and I can recognize and feel, even if we cannot analyze it."



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Klezmer Conservatory Band, "Der nayer Doayne," *Klez* (Vanguard, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Olin Downes, "The Program Given by the Flonzaley Quartet," *The Boston Post* (31 December 1916), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Bloch, "Man and Music," *The Seven Arts* (March 1917): 498. Cited in Robert Strassburg, *Ernest Bloch* (Los Angeles: California State University, 1977), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Bloch, Program notes for Lincoln Center Performance of Bloch's *Sacred Service*, December 4, 1969, in Strassburg, *Ernest Bloch*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Bloch, *Schelomo* (Deutsche Grammophon, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *Findings* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 98.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *Jeremiah Symphony* (Sony, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Beethoven, *Pastoral Symphony* (conducted by Bruno Walter) (Sony, 1995).

Beethoven, *Pastoral Symphony* (conducted by Furtwängler) (Angel, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> K. Freigedank [Richard Wagner], "Das Judenthum in der Musik," in *Neue Zeitschrift Für Musik* (Leipzig, 3 and 6 September 1850).

<sup>10</sup> Lazare Saminsky, *Music of the Ghetto and the Bible* (New York: Bloch 1934), 74.

<sup>11</sup> Lazare Saminsky, "Schir Haschirim," *On Wings of Jewish Song* (Hansler Classics, 2002). Also "Tov Lehodos" in *Sabbath Evening Service: According to the Union Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch, 1926).

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *De Profundis* (Naïve CD, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> *Sefer Hasidim* §428.

<sup>14</sup> Israel Adler, ed., *Hebrew Writings Concerning Music* (Munich: G. Henle, 1975), 101.

<sup>15</sup> Downes, "The Program," 29.

<sup>16</sup> Dmitri Shostakovich, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich* (ed. Solomon Volkov; trans. Antonina Bouis; New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 156

<sup>17</sup> Gustav Mahler, *Symphony no. 10* (EMI, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004). A CD is included with the book.

<sup>19</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *Jeremiah Symphony* (Sony, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Modest Mussorgsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition* (Decca, 1990).