

Livorno: A Crossroads in the History of Sephardic Religious Music

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For those who would like to see this excellent article in its original form, please visit <https://zamir.org/wp-content/notes/pdfs/2003/Seroussi.pdf>.

Several musical traditions developed among Italian Jews: the “Italiano” rite (centered in Rome), the “Tedesco” (German, i.e. Ashkenazic) tradition in the North and, from the early 16th century, several Sephardic traditions of different geographical origin. The vitality of these distinctive traditions declined steadily from the late 19th century, and even more sharply after World War II. The influence of Italian opera and other concert music, particularly noticeable from the 19th century on, was a significant factor in the shaping of their present state.

In this article we shall attempt to understand the nature of synagogue music from Livorno (Leghorn) from the 18th century onwards. Livorno was a fascinating community, serving as a cultural crossroads, a nexus where the carriers of different Sephardic traditions from the Eastern and Western Mediterranean encountered and enriched each other. Melodies from the Italian-Sephardic synagogue tradition as practiced in Livorno were transmitted to other Sephardic communities in Italy and around the Mediterranean in the early 20th century. Livornese-trained cantors served and introduced melodies from their musical heritage at their new posts in Bucharest, Alexandria, Marseilles, Tunis, Tripoli, Rhodes and Gibraltar. The choral tradition from Livorno spread to other cities in Italy, particularly to Florence, often superseding the old Italian rite.

Our knowledge of the early Livornese synagogue music derives from several sources. The oral traditions were recorded by Dr. Leo Levi and Federico Consolo. We have surviving manuscripts of choral music dating from the second half of the 19th century. There are also descriptions of musical activities in various periodicals, books, prayer books and song collections. In addition, an important, unpublished source is a series of letters written by Italian scholars to A.Z. Idelsohn in 1933–34, in response to his inquiries on the music of Italian Jews.

What transpires from these various sources is that the Livornese synagogue music consists of a synthesized patchwork where several Sephardic traditions merge. This synthesis symbolizes the peculiar history of this particular community: its converso,

Portuguese origins; its position as a center of learning, attracting Jews from North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean; and the accelerated process of modernization that characterized most Italian Jewish communities from the second half of the 19th century on.

Thus, in the sources from Livorno we find Spanish-Portuguese traditions common to the synagogues from Amsterdam, London, and Hamburg; traditions from Morocco, Tunisia, and Salonika; and original compositions in the Baroque, Classic, and Romantic styles of Western art music and choral arrangements of traditional melodies written by professional composers who served the Livornese community. Pieces from the repertoires of synagogues in other Italian cities (Venice in particular) and from Paris are also found in Livornese sources.

The earliest musical scores from Jewish Livorno are connected to the kabbalist Rabbi Raphael Emmanuel Hay Ricchi (Ferrara 1688–Modena 1743). Having visited Florence, Trieste, Venice, Constantinople, Izmir, Salonika, Amsterdam, London, and Safed, Ricchi had rich international experience, and probably gathered musical traditions from different sources within the Sephardic sphere.

Ricchi composed melodies for two *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) from the circumcision ceremony. They were notated at his request by the renowned Jewish composer from Amsterdam, Abraham Caceres, and published in Ricchi's commentary on the Mishnah, *Hon 'Ashir* (Amsterdam, 1730/1). Ricchi also included in his *Parpera'ot le-Hokhma* (published in Livorno, 1742) libretti for several short cantatas intended for musical performance during the Jewish festivals and several other festive occasions. The titles of these texts leave no doubt as to their intended musical performance: "Recitativa [sic]—Arietta." Moreover, two of them bear the explicit title *al pi ha-musiqā*, i.e., "accord to [composed or instrumental] music."

From Ricchi's evidence we can see that Hebrew art music in the Baroque style, probably taught at their new posts in Bucharest, Alexandria, with instrumental accompaniment, was customary among the Jews in Livorno as early as the 1740s. On the other hand, the notations in *Hon 'Ashir* unveil his acquaintance with melodies of Ottoman Sephardic origin. The tune that Ricchi adapted to one of his *piyyutim* is a variant of the melody for *Lekha dodi* that was still sung by the Turkish Jews in Vienna in the late 19th century.

Art music was also performed at 18th-century Jewish weddings in Livorno. At the wedding of Jacob and Anne Aghib, music composed especially for this occasion by Maestro Horacion Mei, organist of the Cathedral of Livorno, was performed. At the same wedding, the Livornese Pietro Nardini, chief musician at the Court of Florence and one of the most distinguished Italian violinists of the 18th century, played a Sonata and the bride sang an aria "as an amateur."

The propensity to incorporate Western art music into the synagogue further increased at

the beginning of the 19th century. The tenure of composer Michele Bolaffi (1768–1842) as musical director can be considered a turning point in the development of choral and instrumental music in the Great Synagogue of Livorno. Bolaffi was a figure of international stature, having served in England, Germany, and France.

The choral repertoire of Livorno was not limited to works by local composers. The influence of French synagogue music is apparent in the inclusion of works by the liturgical composers Samuel Naumbourg (1817–80) and Emile Jonas (1927–1905) in the Livornese collections. Also present in the Livornese repertoire is a work found in the choral repertoire of the Portuguese synagogue in Bayonne. *Ezrekha el mi-qodesh*, which is attributed to rabbi “Cologna,” is based on the tune of “Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser” (the hymn of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, set to the melody by Joseph Haydn).

The development of the choral elements in the music of the services during this period was reflected in the architecture of Livorno’s Great Synagogue. In the years 1846–48, when the ark was reconstructed and enlarged, a special area was reserved for the choir.

The growing role of choral music at all the public events held in the Livorno synagogue is also documented in news items. From *Il Vessillo Israelitico* we learn that choral music with instrumental accompaniment was performed at weddings, funerals, anniversaries of the foundation of communal institutions, and also events related to the Jewish schools. The funeral services of Fortunata Milul, for example, were presided over by the chief cantor Moise Ventura accompanied by the choir conducted by his son, Ernesto Ventura. On the occasion of a party on behalf of the *Società di Soccorso agli Asfittici*, Cantor Moise Ventura officiated. He sang Psalm 61 and the blessing for the well-being of the king and the people of Italy with organ accompaniment. As a contemporary testimony recalls: “This...party left a lasting impression on the public, who attends each year to enjoy the sublime music of the immortal Maestro Garzia.”

Purim celebrations at the synagogue were particularly grandiose. Unlike the traditional folk songs that were sung during the festive meal at private homes, the services at the synagogue were occasions for elaborate musical performances. An account from 1888 states:

The *Società coral* deserves special praise because it sings without salary.... The solemn *mincha* service on the day of Purim was a great success. Never in the past were so many people seen at the synagogue.... The *pizmonim* were sung this year to music by the immortal Maestro Garzia accompanied by harmonium. The youngsters Veroli and Ventura formed with the others an ensemble of voices for the pleasure of the large and cultured public. Once the prayer ended, the choir director Giuseppe Pontecorboli was praised and the members of the community presented him with a smoking kit.

The influence of the synagogue music from Livorno is also evident in the mobility of cantors from this city who were employed by Jewish communities in other parts of Italy

and France. Some compositions by Livornese cantors and composers were disseminated by Sephardic scholars who had attended yeshivot in Livorno on their return to their communities in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. The best example of this phenomenon is the setting of Mizmor le-David by Michele Bolaffi, which is sung to this day in many Sephardic and non-Sephardic communities around the globe. [The first page of this music is reproduced on the preceding page, and it will be heard at Zamir's concert on June 8.]

The new synagogue music by 19th-century composers such as Bolaffi coexisted in Livorno with the traditional repertoire of Sephardic origin chanted by the cantor. The latter, however, was eroded at the expense of the former. This phenomenon was lamented, in retrospect, by Cantor Ernesto Ventura in the 1930s. In his own words:

Rabbi [Elia] Benamozegh was right and...I myself am guilty [of substituting new music in place of the traditional]. In fact, one could compose magnificent pieces, by harmonizing and, in a certain manner, developing the traditional melodies and modes of our tradition. It is necessary, however, to have in mind that today the mentality is different and diverse and, let's face it, more healthy than that of old times. In the synagogues of Bolaffi the so-called intellectuals...had little appreciation for the traditional chants then in use.

In summation, the diversity of musical traditions found in Livorno stem from the composite character of the Jewish population of this city. The Livornese synagogues served as a crossroads where diverse Sephardic traditions met, were assimilated by visiting scholars, and were transmitted by them to other Sephardic centers in the Mediterranean basin. Moreover, Livorno was at the vanguard of the Jewish communities of Europe in the modernization process of liturgical music. An organ was used in its main synagogue already in the late 18th century, and original choral music replaced much of the traditional repertoire during the 19th century. This is the complex picture that emerges from the rich musical traditions of Livorno.

[Notes from Zamir, Spring 2003](#)