

Preface

Nearly all Jews (and many outside the faith) have had an experience of something they call “Jewish music,” whether in the synagogue, at a life-cycle celebration, or on the concert stage. Close examination of these variant expressions of “Jewish culture” will reveal enormous differences among them, and attempts to reach consensus on what “Jewish music” really is will yield as many opinions as there are voices in the discussion.

This book attempts to answer a slightly different question: How have the values and traditions of Jewish people been reflected in music produced around the world and throughout history? Because Jewish people have lived as a minority culture within larger communities, Jews have “borrowed” aspects of the majority culture along the way. This has led to the creation of more than one kind of music, in more than one language.

Admittedly, there have been other books that have tried to tell the story of Jewish music. First on the scene, and most comprehensive, was Abraham Zvi Idelsohn’s *Jewish Music*, a one-volume compilation based upon his monumental ten-part *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*. Subsequent books have covered much of the same ground, from a variety of perspectives and for a range of potential audiences. What new ground does this book intend to explore?

One of the most important contributions of this book is its comprehensive examination of the 20th century. From our vantage point in these early days of the 21st century, we can see clearly that the last

100 years have been revolutionary on a variety of fronts, including the profusion of music that was produced in Europe, North America, and especially Israel. As theological reforms begun in the 19th century continued to affect the century that followed, synagogue music underwent significant change. The 20th century also saw the evolution of an entirely new genre, with the development of Jewish art music for the concert stage. At the same time (and as in every other time and place), folk and popular music continued to give voice to “the people.” Brief but plentiful musical illustrations throughout the book provide written examples of the music discussed, but even more valuable is the accompanying CD recording that provides the reader with an opportunity to hear and appreciate the wide range of what is called “Jewish music.”

It would have been impossible, however, to chart a coherent course for “Jewish music” by simply beginning at the dawn of the 20th century. The last 100 years did not happen in a vacuum—Jewish people have been producing music for more than 3,000 years. So it is that this book begins “in the beginning” and explores the earliest music of the Jews and the evolution of rabbinic attitudes that impacted on Jewish musical life for hundreds of years. We also discover the many ways in which Jewish music evolved in spite of the checkered history of the Jewish people—and to a large extent, because of it.

Does this book cover every work by every composer who has claimed to write “Jewish music?” Certainly not. Fortunately, the number of contributors to the field of Jewish music is long—and growing longer by the day. Decisions on whom to include were based on an examination of the music and musicians who made a difference in the world of Jewish music, whose work charted new territory and had an impact on that which followed.

This book also chose to focus on music that, in the words of noted musicologist Curt Sachs, was written “by Jews, for Jews, as Jews.”¹ It is a well-documented fact that Jewish people have been disproportionately represented among the writers of music for Tin Pan Alley, the Broadway stage, and even the rock and roll scene. Notwithstanding claims that some of this music was influenced by the Jewish backgrounds of its composers, however, it was not created for an exclusively, or even primarily, Jewish audience. Even

more obviously, the significant accomplishments of a host of Jewish composers, instrumentalists, and vocalists may be a positive reflection of their successful integration into “mainstream” life, but it does not reflect any contribution to Jewish culture. Tragically, the rejection of some composers and performers because of their Jewish backgrounds has also been a fact of history, but it does not confer upon the music they produced a stamp of “Jewish” content (no matter what their detractors may have claimed).

This book is designed for all readers. One need not be able to read music or be conversant in musical theory or music history to understand and appreciate the information here. In its pages the reader will find a clear discussion of the development of Jewish music and intelligible explanations of musical issues, without the jargon and technical detail of books intended only for professional musicians. Aspects of Jewish life and ritual that are intimately connected with the development of Jewish music are also explained so that all readers can follow the scope and sequence of Jewish history, using the development of music as a helpful catalyst for understanding and discovery.²

Discovering Jewish Music is the product of many years of study and the distillation of years of teaching. I have learned from all of my students and hope this volume will make a contribution to those who follow them, as well as to independent readers eager to discover the “joys of Jewish music.” I am also profoundly grateful for the encouragement and material assistance I have received from colleagues, family, and friends. Dr. Rela Mintz Geffen, who has been my mentor as well as my “sister,” was the first to read each chapter, and offered substantive advice and critique based upon her wide base of knowledge and her vantage point as the ideal, prototypical, “intelligent, non-musician reader.” This book would not have been written without her. I am also enormously indebted to Cantor Deborah Tanzer-Cohen for the painstaking hours she spent transcribing the many musical illustrations in this volume. She has gone from being my student to my colleague, and she has always been my friend.

I am pleased to acknowledge the cooperation of the many publishers and producers whose valuable works are excerpted in this volume. In particular, I am appreciative of the many living composers and performers whose work is included here and on the accompanying CD. I hope their generosity will be rewarded by increased sup-

port for their work.

I would like to thank the editors and staff of The Jewish Publication Society. Their enthusiasm for this project and their patience in seeing it to fruition have been a source of inspiration. My final thanks are reserved for those nearest to me, who have provided the greatest encouragement, and made the greatest sacrifices to see this book in print. To my father, Emanuel Bryan; my husband, Herb; and my children, I extend my gratitude and my love. ~~

Marsha Bryan Edelman

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