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# Russian Jewish Art Music: The Voice of a People

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## Russian Jewish Art Music: The Voice of a People

There is nothing so binding and connecting as the language of music. It is a language so deep that it goes beyond mere words and links individuals and entire societies together in a way that nothing else can. It gives outsiders a glimpse into the hearts and emotions of a people group and unites them with a single identity which is still displayed in a variety of ways. We see an example of this in the study of the music of the Jewish people. Music in Jewish culture is a complex and diverse topic, and there are several different traditions which could be included in the overarching term “Jewish” music. Many of these traditions have their roots in ancient religious music and temple worship and should be considered branches of a larger whole. Throughout history the Jewish people have been forced to disperse themselves throughout all areas of the globe largely due to racial and religious persecution; this has had a direct impact on their music. Much of the music holds to ancient traditional modes, meters and forms which are then combined with elements from the various societies into which the Jews have integrated themselves. Due to this fact, there are common threads which unify the music while still allowing it to remain regionally distinctive. In this paper I will look specifically at Eastern European culture and the way this has been represented in art music. Art music is considered to be a music which is somewhat distinct from the general culture of a people. It is music in a classical style which is separate from the characteristics of the “traditional” music of a society. However, when we apply the term “Jewish” to this idea we can then deduce that it would be classically styled music infused with the elements of traditional

Jewish musical composition. Jewish art music has played an important role in the development of a national identity of a people group divided by physical distance, yet united in a common origin.

In his book, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*, Abraham Z. Idelsohn gives a vivid description in his definition of Jewish music. He says, “Jewish music is the song of Judaism through the lips of the Jew. It is the tonal expression of Jewish life and development over a period of more than two thousand years.”<sup>1</sup>

Characteristics of Jewish music vary from tradition to tradition; however, there are some prominent ideas which promote a broad and overarching standard. This type of music is very modal with specific ideas and practices associated with specific modes. Idelsohn describes a mode as being “composed of a number of motives (i.e., short musical figures or groups of tones) within a certain scale.”<sup>2</sup> In ancient history there were Bible modes and prayer modes, which played a large role in temple and synagogue worship. Idelsohn says “Both Biblical and prayer modes constitute the oldest, the most genuine and the most Oriental-semitic part of Jewish music, upon which the later creations were based.”<sup>3</sup> Several of these Biblical modes include the Pentateuch mode and the mode of Ruth; these modes continue to vary depending on the region, country, or religious community.<sup>4</sup> The traditional Pentateuch mode is based upon two tetrachords which start on e and are joined by a whole step.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> A. Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development* (New York; NY: Holt, 1929), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Idelsohn, 89.

<sup>4</sup> Idelsohn, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Idelsohn, 39.

traditional mode of Ruth is derived from the same scale as the Pentateuch, but with different motivic elements.<sup>6</sup> These are only a few examples of the many varied intricacies of the Jewish modal systems.

Although the broad definition of Jewish music points to a somewhat specific origin, there are distinct divisions which must be made to gain a legitimate understanding of style. Israeli music is different from European Jewish music and among European musical styles we see divisions between Western and Eastern Jews. With the birth of the nation of Israel on May 14, 1948, there was an outpouring of nationalism that attempted to make a distinct break with Europe. Israelis wanted to establish a cultural identity separate from Europe and everything it entailed.<sup>7</sup> Israeli scholar Ronit Seter says, “The founding fathers’ generation was clearly aware (or deleteriously too conscious) of their role as pathfinders, as the pioneers who created the foundation of the musical culture.”<sup>8</sup> In the creation of an “Israeli” style, the Russian-Jewish idiom was seen more as something to be avoided, and Seter says that many Israelis saw it as “*galut*- music” or exile music.<sup>9</sup> A large amount of the folklore and orientalism of the European styles were different from what has been developed in Israel, and at the time of the birth of the nation it was very important that their own personal national identity be established as being distinct from Europe; this caused a large break between the different styles.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the Western Jewish styles can

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<sup>6</sup> Idelsohn, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ronit Seter, *Yuvalim Be-Israel: Nationalism in Jewish-Israeli Art Music, 1940-2000* ( S.I.: R. Seter, 2004), 4

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Seter, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

be seen as another separate branch of “Jewish” music which has been influenced by the surrounding cultures.

Historically, in both Eastern and Western traditions we can recognize the markedly spiritual aspect of the music, and everything about Jewish music, including the folk-songs, can be seen through the lens of religion. Idelsohn says that, “Just as to the Jew religion meant life and life religion, so to him sacred song has been folk song, and folk song sacred song.”<sup>11</sup> This has changed as the centuries have progressed but there are still traces of religion in the composition, performance, and subject of modern songs which are still somewhat influenced by “the Synagogue in both text and melody.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout history there was never a large number of secular songs coming from the Jewish culture due mainly to the assimilation of the Jew into the culture in which he resided. Around 1500 this began to change and there was more musical output, but “it discontinued with the re-admittance of the Jew to the society of his neighbors, because his separate social life ceased then to exist.”<sup>13</sup> The resurfacing alienation of the Jewish people in Europe around the turn of the twentieth century gave rise to an increased interest in the use of music for the building of national identity.

In the European Jewish music tradition one finds different characteristics which are rooted in location, and even among the Ashkenazim Jews, which are a specific sub-set of Jews, there are different branches of music where the Western-German

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<sup>11</sup> Idelsohn, 358.

<sup>12</sup> Idelsohn, 391.

<sup>13</sup> Idelsohn, 379.

styles are somewhat distinct from that of the music stemming from Eastern countries.<sup>14</sup> Eastern European Jewish music has distinct characteristics which give it a separate and special significance. This music has both secular and religious themes, and the language itself consists largely of what we would now consider to be Yiddish. The songs are described as being “simple and short in form and content, voicing the sentiments of the life of the people at large.”<sup>15</sup> As with most folk music, nearly every aspect of the joys and sorrows of life are utilized as content for these songs. Looking particularly at the Russian Jewish idiom, we can see the integration of non-Jewish elements combined with traditional Russian ones. This showed an attempt at building a cultural identity outside of having a unified homeland. The content of the Eastern European Jewish folk-song is very broad. A lot of this music is in minor, sometimes utilizing the major seventh, but far outweighing the use of the *Hedjaz*, or chromatic, and major scales.<sup>16</sup> We can see that while the Germanic nations often associated the minor with sadness and major with joy this is not the case for the Eastern type of music. Idelsohn says that “the Semitic, Latin, and Slavic nations do not share this conception. Therefore we find so many joyous dance and humorous tunes in minor among the folk-songs of these nations.”<sup>17</sup> Typical meters of these folk-tunes are largely duple, triple, or compound meter; in general they are musically and

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<sup>14</sup> Idelsohn, 358.

<sup>15</sup> Idelsohn, 391.

<sup>16</sup> Idelsohn, 398.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

structurally straight-forward and balanced consisting of up to three periods or twenty-four bars.<sup>18</sup>

While the Jewish people have spread to nearly every corner of the globe, the countries of Eastern Europe have remained the homeland for a large percentage of Jewish families. This has impacted their culture and, in turn, their music. Thus it would seem natural that the origin of a culturally based musical movement addressing Jewish music would lie in one of these countries. Located in Russia, one such society was known as the New Jewish School of Folk Music, and although the society itself did not last long, it had far-reaching effects and implications. This society sought to emphasize the use and importance of folk-tunes and folk-music in creating a national identity. James Loeffler says “There is no such thing as nationalism without music and song.”<sup>19</sup>

Amidst increasing social and political unrest and uncertainty in Russia, music was something in which the Jews were still able to participate in mainstream society. In the early 1900s there was a substantial surfacing of Jewish musicians; parents wanted their children to have intense and extensive musical training. This was due at least in part to the benefits that being a musician provided in the difficult social life in Russia at the time; it also appeared to provide the professionally trained musician with “tangible legal benefits including the fabled right of residence (*pravo zhiteslstva*) outside the Pale, and a fairly stable, high-status professional career as a performer or

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<sup>18</sup> Idelsohn, 400.

<sup>19</sup> James Benjamin Loeffler, *The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 56.

teacher.”<sup>20</sup> The Pale was the specified place in which the Jews were allowed to reside, and permission was generally needed to obtain the right to leave, so this would have been a considerable advantage for the Jew. Despite the large number of Jewish musicians, there was still a deep negative attitude toward Jews and their music; the Wagnerian idea of the Jew being unable to produce anything original still prevailed in society and was growing in popularity.<sup>21</sup> This anti-Semitic view toward the Jew and his music was a driving force behind the establishment of the School, and it was almost as if the founders were attempting to prove the critics wrong.<sup>22</sup>

After the revolution of 1905 and subsequent establishment of the Russian Duma, the political possibilities for Russian Jews appeared to be growing; however, the elections of 1907 dashed their hopes, and the Jews realized that for survival they would have to switch their focus from politics to culture.<sup>23</sup> One of their ways of doing this was to develop a distinct culturally specific style of composition which would help to unify the Jewish people.<sup>24</sup> In addition to this, they did not want to simply unite people based on the past, but build a new culture. They also recognized that it would neither be wise nor beneficial to build the society around one particular ideology, and the result was a brainchild of many different political parties including liberal Zionists, Socialists, Social Democrats, and diaspora nationalists—the School really only sought the advancement of culture and the drawing of the Jewish people together

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<sup>20</sup> Loeffler, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Loeffler, 116-117.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Loeffler, 109.

<sup>24</sup> Loeffler, 127.

through the means of music.<sup>25</sup> The founders attempted to stay away from advocating what they saw as extreme views such as Zionism which “was viewed by most Jewish conservatory students as too chauvinist and ideologically rigid.”<sup>26</sup>

The first meeting of the Society was in St. Petersburg on November 30, 1908, which is where its headquarters remained for the next ten years before the onset of the Russian Revolution forced it out of the city.<sup>27</sup> Even though the Society had come this far, there were still many integral issues to be discussed, boundaries to be defined, and goals around which to unite. There were more than just musicians and composers in the founding group with the more administrative aspect being directed by representatives of the already existing Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia, or the OPE. Because of the multiplicity among the group of founding individuals, there was some disconnect about what should be the main focus of the Society and “the more elite artistic aims of the composers naturally clashed with the broader cultural mission of public education and communal engagement.”<sup>28</sup> The composers wanted to focus on developing their skills, while others wanted to start public programs, and while many of these programs were never implemented there was an “internal educational circle” created. However, the main focus of the group remained the music itself, and the three main objectives of the Society became the promulgation of sheet music, sound recordings, and a Jewish

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<sup>25</sup> Loeffler, 113.

<sup>26</sup> Loeffler, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Gradenwitz, *The Music of Israel: Its Rise and Growth Through 5000 Years*. (New York: Norton, 1949), 228.

<sup>28</sup> Loeffler, 121.

song-book.<sup>29</sup> Over the course of their existence they were able to accomplish all but the sound recordings.

Naturally, the most pressing issue facing the group was in regard to the definition of their musical idiom. They faced many difficult questions in their attempts to classify their music. Was it based more on Western elements with its tonality, harmony, and chords? How were they going to determine their criteria? Much of their traditional music up until this time consisted of non-Western ideas, such as microtones, the absence of harmony, and of “fixed scalar conventions.”<sup>30</sup> This was a complicated problem because while they wanted to create their own idiom, they also wanted to be recognized as a legitimate part of European society.<sup>31</sup> Another major question they were asking was in regard to the ethnicity of the composer—could Jewish music only be composed by an ethnic Jew, or would they allow for other nationalities and religions to compose in their idiom? The group eventually ended up with a compromise by saying that, officially, nationality and religion of the composer were not specified, but according to Loeffler, the group unofficially decided to refrain from publishing or performing works by non-ethnic Jews.<sup>32</sup> They also had to deal with the problem of language. The main question was whether or not to use Yiddish, Hebrew, or other European languages, and they ended up deciding that folk songs

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<sup>29</sup> Loeffler, 136.

<sup>30</sup> Loeffler, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Loeffler, 118.

would be in Yiddish, religious in Hebrew, and original works would be in European languages.<sup>33</sup>

Another pressing difficulty lay in defining the actual characteristics of the music itself. They decided that “Jewish National Music” or *everiskaia narodnaia muzkya*, would include both sacred and secular genres.<sup>34</sup> A large portion of the music was composed around pre-existing folk tunes, “frequently identified as folk music transcriptions, labeled with the subtitles ‘folk song,’ ‘folk melody, or ‘fantasy on a folk-melody.’”<sup>35</sup> One of the first major “Jewish folk” pieces entitled “Hebrew Melody” was composed by one of the important founding composers, Joseph Achron. He stated that, “Jewish composers needed to recognize three crucial fundamentals; the distinctive Jewish melos, the characteristic melodic ornamentation and recitative style of Ashkenazi vocal and instrumental music, and the absence of harmony in traditional music.”<sup>36</sup> Achron wanted to add harmony to the modal folk tradition and he attempted to build a more westernized style around the basic monophonic, modal Jewish sound.<sup>37</sup>

There were some problems which arose with the clarification of folk music; not all of the representative music of this time came from what could be considered “folk” in its purest sense.<sup>38</sup> When looking at a specific piece of music composed in the style of the School, one finds the presence of traditional characteristics, even if the

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<sup>33</sup> Loeffler, 149.

<sup>34</sup> Loeffler, 114.

<sup>35</sup> Loeffler, 139.

<sup>36</sup> Loeffler, 144.

<sup>37</sup> Loeffler, 147-148.

<sup>38</sup> Loeffler, 139-140.

piece itself might have a unique background. A representative piece of music from the collection was arranged by Mordechai Shalyt entitled “Eli, Eli” which translates as “My God, My God.” This is a work composed for voice and piano, and was part of a collection which came out of the Society, but whose background was in reality not a “traditional” folk tune. It had originally been composed in New York by an immigrant for Yiddish Theater named Jacob Koppel Sandler.<sup>39</sup> There was a large dispute over the actual origin of the piece which ended up in court. The case resulted in Sandler being recognized as the author but retaining no legal rights to the song. Despite these facts, one can still see that it is typical of the folk style with its combined Yiddish and Hebrew text, minor modality, meter which alternates between 6/8, 3/4, 4/4, and 2/4--all common folk meters, is based on Biblical text, and deals with the sorrow of the Jewish people.

Despite the short life of the Society, there is still a repertoire of beautiful music born out of it. *Rakim meroch panayich* is a piece by a composer named Alexander Krein who got his start at the Moscow Conservatory as a cellist. This piece was originally written in Russian and then translated into Hebrew. It is based largely on the Song of Songs, but the atonality and the discordant tones make it hard to believe it is actually a love song. *Az ich volt gehat* was written by composer Alexander Zhitomirsky who at one time studied under Rimsky-Korsakov at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. It is a Yiddish lullaby which starts out sweet and innocent as a mother sings to her child, but in the second verse it takes a darker turn. This piece is in 2/4

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

and is composed in a very minor sounding mode from beginning to end. *Omrin yeshna eretz* is another Hebrew piece composed by Joel Engel. Engel was a man described as being “the most seminal figure among all those associated with the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Music.”<sup>40</sup> In addition to having studied at the Moscow Imperial Music Conservatory, he wrote extensively about music and was eventually given a place in the Russian Imperial Academy of the Arts. This piece is, once again, in a minor mode with a very contemplative sound in keeping with the message of the song. It is in 12/8 and is really the voice of the Jewish people discussing where the land of Israel is and who has spoken of it. In this piece the collective people are specifically addressing the Rabbi Akiva. These pieces which I will be performing are only a few examples of songs which came as a result of the work of dedicated composers who wanted to carry on their culture through music.

Despite the difficulties the Jewish people have faced throughout history, they have managed to maintain a certain amount of cohesiveness even in their dispersion across the globe. Like the majority of people groups, they have traditions and practices which link them intrinsically together. If we truly want to understand an individual or a group of people, we must look at the art they produce. The music of the Russian Jews, while taking elements from various cultures and societies, speaks of their personal hopes, joys, and traditions, which one can only truly understand by being born into their society. However, for those of us outside looking in, we can get a beautiful picture of the rich lives and passions of this people group, and we can gain

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<sup>40</sup> *The St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music* (Tara Publications, 1998,) 27.

a greater understanding and appreciation for the traditions and practices of all cultures.

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