

What Is Jewish Music?

BY SETH ROGOVOY

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. — Abraham Z. Idelsohn, “Jewish Music: Its Historical Development,” 1929.



Marc Chagall's The Fiddler, 1913

The question “What is Jewish music?” has provoked more than a few essays, books, and late-night, booze-soaked BS sessions among Jewish (and non-Jewish) musicians, composers, and people who write about Jewish music. An inquiry that should seem to be pretty straightforward turns out to be quite elusive, begging the question, do Irish musicians have such a hard time defining Irish music? What about Greeks? Persians? Chinese?

As quickly as someone postulates a definition of Jewish music, it is easily shot down. For example, let's say “Jewish music is music made by Jews.” So in that case, are “White Christmas” and “Easter Parade,” stemming from the musical pen of Israel Baline aka Irving Berlin, Jewish songs? That's a bit of a stretch. And that's even before defining who is a Jew, which becomes especially problematic with

18th- and 19th-century composers whose ancestors may have been Jewish but whose families may have converted somewhere along the way, or composers who may have had themselves baptized, even if only to enter bourgeois society in order to gain access to patronage and commissions that may have otherwise proven elusive.

Matters of *halakha*, or Jewish law, then undoubtedly become part of the discussion. Is a heretic still a Jew? Do you define a Jew solely by the ancestry of the biological birth mother? Before you know it, what began as an inquiry about music has become a Talmudic debate, typically argued by people who really don't have the scholarly tools even to be engaging in such a discussion.



George and Ira Gershwin

So you throw out the “music made by Jews” definition—which if you don't, would then include all music made by Benny Goodman, the Gershwins, most of the so-called Great American Songbook (Rodgers, Hart, Kern, Hammerstein, etc.), the Brill Building songwriters (Sedaka, Goffin, Diamond, Pomus, Leiber, Stoller), and a hefty dose of rock 'n' roll by bands including Hot Tuna, Steely Dan, the Ramones, Van Halen, and Kiss, and by solo artists including Lou Reed, Billy Joel, Carole King, Perry Farrell, and the late Amy Winehouse—and instead try to construct a definition around the music itself and not the music-makers.

Certainly synagogue music is Jewish music, you say—perhaps even the very essence of Jewish music. But what happens when you learn that a popular rendition of “Adon Olam” is actually sung to the tune of a German drinking song? Is that Jewish music? Well, maybe it is—maybe it’s been transformed somehow. Indeed, some 18th-century Hasidic rebbes—many of whom were composers—believed that transmuting regional folk melodies of non-Jewish origin into nigunim, wordless prayer chants, was a mystical act of *tikkun olam* in the original sense of the term—repairing a broken, shattered world (as opposed to the flimsy way the term is flung around these days to incorporate any activity of social service, devoid of spiritual content, which entirely misses the point). According to music historian Abraham Z. Idelsohn, this practice dated back to the music of the Temple in Jerusalem, wherein “The vocal song of the Temple, like all religious song among the ancient and primitive nations, drew its sap from the folksong, though foreign tunes may have occasionally crept in. These Temple songs [were] folk-tunes modified and sanctified.”

But even more problematic than the occasional prayer melody of non-Jewish origin is the synagogue music of the synagogue in which you won’t set foot. Or the temple where the congregation sings a rousing version of “This Little Light of Mine” or “Down By the Riverside,” having lost any connection to normative Jewish spiritual music (typically a symptom of a more general disconnect with Jewish tradition and spirituality throughout a congregation’s worship practices) and instead co-opting African-American spiritual music—whose themes and motifs, of course, are based originally on Jewish elements, particularly the liberation story recounted in the Book of Exodus. Is this then Jewish music or not?

And what of the contemporary music of the American Reform movement, much of it written by composers such as Debbie Friedman, Craig Taubman, Louis Dobin and Jeff Klepper, whose work is rooted much more in the American neo-folk revival of the 1960s than it is in the cantorial synagogue modes?

There are certain strains of Jewish music that have survived for centuries or even millennia and that are recognizable in Israel and throughout the Diaspora. These are few but rare, but most notably they include the cantillation, or chant, of the sacred texts. Before the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings were written down and codified, they were passed along orally. And as anyone who has ever tried it knows, it is easier to recall long stories if they are put to melody. This is nothing unique to Judaism—it is part of the Bardic tradition of great works of Eastern and Western traditions. But even after the sacred texts of Judaism were written down, they continued to be sung, and a whole notation sprang up to aid the one doing the chanting. Different texts have their own unique modes that fit the character of the work being sung; the diacritical marks are merely guides to phrasing and rhythm. But the melody of the book of Genesis differs from that of the book of Isaiah, which differs from the book of Lamentations, which differs from that of the Megillat Esther, and so on.

Similarly, the traditional prayer services also have their own modes, suited to their application. The melodies of the daily prayers are different from those of the Sabbath, and the modes—the notes in relation to each other—change for the Days of Awe, in order to reflect better the mood of that liturgy, which, as it happens, is one of awe.

Perhaps all this seems self-evident, perhaps not, and a complete discussion of liturgical music would quickly become technical and involve an explanation of musical modes far beyond what can be accomplished here and somewhat of a diversion from the question at hand.

All this does help describe what is inarguably Jewish music, but it still doesn’t answer the greater question of what qualifies as Jewish music, especially once one allows for the individual expression or improvisation of cantors, rebbes, composers, and songwriters whose intention is to write Jewish music—and whose works are generally considered by listeners to be Jewish.

I hesitate even to introduce the word “intention” into this discussion, because authorial intention



Leonard Bernstein

has long been consigned to the trash heap of musicology and musical criticism (as it has been for the discussion of any creative works). But it may just need to be revived in order to come to some general consensus of what today constitutes Jewish music.

Going back to Idelsohn, as all who write about Jewish music invariably do and must, even though much of his scholarship by now is suspect, one can't help but linger on his description of the role of the Eastern European cantor, or *chazan*. The *chazan*, Idelsohn writes, "had to satisfy the popular desire for music—for a music which should express the sentiments of the Jew, interpret his ideals, his wishes, and his hopes as a Jew, give tonal expression to his pains and sorrows, release him from the weight of his heavy burden as an oppressed and disfranchised human being, and interpret that glorious past from the Exodus from Egypt to the Fall of the Temple. The Jew demanded that the *chazan*, through his music, make him forget his actual life, and that he elevate him on the wings of his tunes into a fantastic paradisiacal world, affording him a foretaste of the Messianic time in the heavenly Jerusalem."

That's all. Nothing less and nothing more. When I read these words, I certainly recognize this aim, conscious or otherwise, in the singing of my grandfather of blessed memory, who was a *chazan* and whose voice lives on in some cherished home

recordings he made in the 1970s. And although Idelsohn doesn't postulate it, I think it's useful to read this passage when reflecting on a specific piece of music, or a body of work by a specific performer or composer, and see how it lives up to the role that Idelsohn assigns the *chazan*, who more than perhaps any individual has been the caretaker of and very embodiment of Jewish music for so many centuries.

I think this is as good as any a definition of Jewish music. It certainly includes normative Jewish religious music of the synagogue, as well as the improvisations of the cantor. Clearly it encompasses the "secular" tradition of klezmer music—itself rooted in the modes and sound of synagogue music. Yiddish, Sephardic and Yemenite folk-song, as well as Yiddish theater and art music, comfortably reflect these aspects that Idelsohn delineates.

When it comes to the musical production of such 20th-century songwriters as Berlin, Rodgers, Kern, Gershwin, and Hammerstein, while one may find certain Jewish elements or echoes in some of their work, it's harder to make the case for it as Jewish music, and rightly so. On the other hand, when we look at contemporary composers of art music including Osvaldo Golijov, Paul Schoenfield, and John Zorn—all of whom openly acknowledge their indebtedness to Jewish musical motives and their intentions to build upon this music—they clearly land in the domain of Jewish music. And in the popular music of our time, I would make the case that singer-songwriters, including Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, are heirs to the tradition of which Idelsohn writes—indeed, this was the very theme of my book, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*.

As for the great Jewish composers and musicians of the 19th and 20th centuries of what we call "classical music," or those non-Jews of that world



Gustav Mahler

who chose to address Jewish themes, these present us with perhaps the most difficulty when it comes to wrestling with the question, "Is it Jewish music?" Certainly some of them intended to "elevate" Jewish prayer music and Jewish folk music into the realm of

transcendent works of art. Certainly some of them drew upon recognizable Jewish source materials—prayer melodies and modes—to create works of great beauty and profundity. But to go back to Idelsohn's definition of the aim of the *chazan*—was their project first and foremost a Jewish one, intended to speak to and for Jewish listeners, in a form of what I would call musical prophecy? Or wasn't it part and parcel of a greater European (read: Christian) form, and as such, inevitably having its Jewishness subsumed by the tradition itself?

Works by Leonard Bernstein, Gustav Mahler, Felix Mendelssohn, Darius Milhaud, Ernest Bloch, and Max Bruch (who, while not Jewish, suffered the fate of having his music banned by the Nazis due to the success of his orchestral setting of the *Kol Nidrei* from the Yom Kippur liturgy) undoubtedly challenge any conventional notions of what is Jewish music. Although he was the grandson of the great Jewish Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, Felix Mendelssohn was raised as a non-Jew by parents who turned their back on Judaism and had their son baptized. And one of Mendelssohn's greatest

professional achievements was to revive interest in the avowedly Christian works of the then-forgotten composer, Johannes Sebastian Bach, most notably his *St. Matthew Passion*. Idelsohn had this to say about classical composers of Jewish ancestry: "On examination of their creations we discover not a single element that bears Jewish features that might be reckoned a distinctly Jewish contribution."

While there is undoubtedly great truth in what Idelsohn writes, and while to a great extent the European classical tradition was part and parcel of the Christian Enlightenment, Idelsohn probably overstates the fact. Which puts me in mind of another great sociocultural critic, the United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who in a 1964 ruling on an obscenity charge, famously resisted defining pornography, insisting, rather, "I know it when I see it."

The ultimate test of what is Jewish music, similarly, must be, "I know it when I hear it."

Seth Rogovoy is a music critic and the author of "*The Essential Klezmer*" and "*Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet*".

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Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *A Box at the Theater (At the Concert)* (detail), 1880. The Clark, 1955.594

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