

The Russian Chamber Chorus of New York
*Currents of Jewish Classical Tradition:
America, Israel and Russia*

Notes on the Program

by Nikolai Kachanov, Artistic Director

When I started to share with friends my idea to create a concert program showcasing Jewish classical music, many people were caught off guard and asked, “Is there such a thing?” Jewish culture, with its myriad sources of influence, was inevitably shaped by the history of the Jewish people, scattered throughout the world. This is the reason why Jewish liturgical music is remarkably diverse, despite the fact that the Jews are united by shared religious beliefs. This diversity becomes increasingly evident when one attempts to analyze all of Jewish musical culture as a whole. Speaking very generally, Jewish musical culture evolved as a ‘global mirror’ while remaining uniquely Jewish. It is my belief that the linguistic and musical variety of this culture creates the false impression that Jewish classical music does not exist.

To answer, it is important to note that famous Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov wrote: “Jewish music does exist; it is wonderful music and it awaits its very own Glinka” (Glinka is widely considered to be the founding father of Russian classical music).

It is well known that Jewish people were influenced by various cultures but it is also important to emphasize how much *they* helped other cultures. The view that Jewish music has played a key role in the development of global musical culture is by no means new. Vladimir Vasilievich Stasov (1824-1906), the most respected Russian music critic of his time, who wrote quite a lot about art and music at the beginning of the 20th century, said, “I constantly felt that there is a significant delay in analyzing the Jewish contribution to the history and substance of new European music. About half, if not more, of all Gregorian, Armenian, Ambrosian and other Christian melodies have Jewish roots. I believe that a robust survey of Jewish national melodies could become a cornerstone of the study of modern European music”.

In fact, the very foundations of musical education in Russia were laid by Jewish people. Their cultural contribution to Russia alone was enormous. A few examples: the Saint Petersburg

Conservatory was founded by Anton Rubinstein, the Moscow Conservatory – by his brother Nikolai; the Gnesin sisters founded the Gnesin State Musical College in Moscow (now the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music), while their brother, Mikhail Gnesin, was the founder of the Conservatory in the city Rostov-on-Don.

In planning this program, I was aiming to show that Jewish classical music exists and that it reflects the soul and spirit of its people, like any other musical culture. I decided to choose works that fit the European definition of classical music.

You may wonder why the greatest Russian composer of the 19th century, Modest Mussorgsky, makes an appearance in a program of Jewish music. Mussorgsky was a composer with a deep understanding of Jewish musical culture. He created works that are considered by Jewish musicologists to have an authentically Jewish sound. Then, shouldn't such works be considered contributions to both Russian and Jewish musical cultures? Mussorgsky was enthusiastic about the musicality of the Jewish people and about the authenticity of Jewish musical material. "The Jews," he wrote, "leap with joy when they hear their music...their eyes shine... I have seen it more than once". He responded with delight to Jewish melodies he heard in Odessa synagogues during his 1879 concert tour: "I have clearly remembered two Israelite themes: one sung by the cantor, the other by the temple choir – the latter in unison. I shall never forget these!"

Many other Russian composers turned to Jewish musical culture for inspiration and contributed to it in return, including Glinka, Balakirev, Rimsky-Korsakov, Ippolitov-Ivanov, Serov, Taneyev, Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

Though it is difficult to grasp the vast history of Jewish musical culture, let alone to try to do so in a single concert program, I aimed to help our audience to hear and feel the beauty of the many incarnations of Jewish musical culture. Music has accompanied the Jewish people throughout history and aided them in overcoming the many trials of their destiny. It is our hope that in spite of the wide dispersion of the Jewish people, Jewish classical music will continue to unite composers and audiences in the creation of new works, continuing the best traditions of modern music.

Part I

Jewish liturgical music is represented in our program by the piece "**Mi Yitneni**" by the German-born composer **Heinrich Schalit**, a liturgical composition written for the Yom Kippur Afternoon Memorial service. This piece exemplifies the influence of European musical culture on contemporary Jewish liturgical music.

You will hear two choruses by Mussorgsky, "**The Destruction of Sennacherib**" and "**Joshua**". Both are a setting of Bible scenes. Mussorgsky wrote the lyrics for "Joshua" based on a description of the Biblical battle of Gibeon, and based the text for "The Destruction of

Sennacherib” on the poem written by Lord Byron in his Hebrew Melodies, using motifs and coloration inspired by Jewish music. Though small in scale, they merit comparison to the operatic choral scenes for which Mussorgsky is so well known. “The Destruction of Sennacherib” was composed in 1867. Vladimir Stasov wrote: “This Chorus contains outstanding musical beauties: a combination of superbly captured Eastern elements.” Mussorgsky finished “Joshua of Nun” in 1877, employing authentic Jewish melodies to evoke a Middle Eastern flavor. The ‘Jewish’ themes of both “Sennacherib” and “Joshua” reflect Mussorgsky’s empathetic interest in Jewry both as a historical underdog and as an ethnic minority with a unique musical culture of its own.

“Eshet Chayil” by Mordecai Seter is a beautiful and touching choral sketch of a traditional Jewish home prayer in which a husband praises his wife, with their children following him in thanking their mothers before partaking in the Shabbat dinner.

“Hora” by Marc Lavry (1903-1967). Another bright choral sketch of joyous folk Jewish dance, written by an Israeli composer and conductor.

“I am Come into My Garden” by Lee R. Kesselman (b. 1951). This expressive piece is a setting of verses from the Song of Songs. We will perform the arrangement for women voices, piano, cello and violin by Nikolai Kachanov.

“Chichester Psalms”, movement III by Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990). This famous, radiant work was commissioned for the 1965 Southern Cathedrals Festival at the Chichester Cathedral by the cathedral's organist, John Birch, and the Dean, Walter Hussey. The world premiere took place at the Philharmonic Hall in New York on July 15, 1965 with the composer conducting. Unlike Mussorgsky’s biblical scenes, which combine Jewish musical tradition with Russian text, this composition by Bernstein employs a reverse combination - biblical Hebrew verse (Psalms 131 and 133) and Christian choral tradition. We will perform this movement in the arrangement for chorus, piano, cello and violin by Mikhail Zeiger.

*Let Israel hope in the Lord
From henceforth and forever.
Behold how good,
And how pleasant it is,
For brethren to dwell
Together in unity.*

These verses, written by an ancient sage millennia ago, sound surprisingly modern and relevant in our days.

Part II

“Prayer of Shmuel Ha Nagid” by **Efrem Podgaitz** (b.1949). AMERICAN PREMIERE. A setting of a Jewish prayer for women's voices and cello. This piece is an example of contemporary composition with extraordinary harmony for women's voices, with a sophisticated cello part. With its blending of ancient Jewish intonations with advanced techniques of contemporary classical music, this composition creates a unique sound palette that ranges from dramatic to celestial.

“Jerusalem Dreams” by **Zakhar Blyakher** (b. 1923) is a four-part choral cycle for choir, soprano voice, flute, clarinet, and percussion. In this composition, the ancient Hebrew “Hallelujah”, King David's Psalm, a bright picture of a folk celebration of Purim, and a touching Lullaby are combined together, conveying a mood of reflection and apprehension with a note of hope for peace for Israel.

Translated by Maria Bromberg