

Some Thoughts About the Future
On the Occasion of the One and
One-Half Jubilee Year of
Dr. Eric Werner

by Jack Gottlieb
 Assistant Professor of Music, HUC-JIR

By paying homage to Eric Werner in his seventy-fifth birthday year, we can only approximate the great honor he has brought to the music of our people. His scholarly studies have had far reaching effect, and have helped expand musicological horizons. What had been the exclusive property of the Jewish community has been transformed by him into discernments important to the understanding of other religious communities, both in the east and west. In his most recent accomplishment, the book A Voice Still Heard, ~~he continues this work, using the songs of the Ashkenazic synagogue.~~ He vividly and authoritatively demonstrates that ^{the songs of the Ashkenazic synagogue} ~~they~~ are a reflection of the musical life found in the host societies to which Ashkenazic Jewry belonged. He shows again, as he had done so brilliantly in his landmark achievement The Sacred Bridge, that there is an interaction of sacred and secular musical streams. Thus, he underscores the rarity of "pure" musical invention in Jewish musical activity.

At the turn of the century, when Werner was born, our American synagogue music was characterized by what we would now call impurities. The works of Schlesinger, Stark, Kaiser and Goldstein were often based on borrowings from opera, church music and other sources. Even if any attempts were made to introduce nussach, the modalities were ignored or misinterpreted. Nor could much claim to so-called authenticity have been ascribed to the "meat and potatoes" music that dominated the scene:

works of Sulzer, Lewandowski and Naumbourg (who were, in turn strongly influenced, respectively, by Schubert, Mendelssohn and Halévy), works which were harmonically and metrically enslaved to the tonal ambience of Middle Europe.

There is no need to dwell at length on all the influences upon our musical history: Monteverdi on Rossi, gypsy-magyar scales on the ahava raba mode, Minnesinger tunes on Mi-Sinai melodies, oriental melismas on hazzanut, Polish and Russian folk songs on Hassidic music, Church chorales and marches on certain perennial Ashkenazic synagogue favorites, cantigas on Sephardic hymns, Balkan rhythms on Israeli dance forms, the interaction of Arabic and Yemenite Jewish song, the impressionist school on Ernest Bloch, etc. space

Attempts were made, nevertheless, by certain synagogue composers to bring us closer to what they believed to be the truth, to more genuine manifestations of the Jewish soul and spirit. Most notably, in the late 19th century this was exemplified in the works of David Nowakowsky; and, more recently, in the pioneering efforts of A. W. Binder and his contemporaries.

The great flowering of Reform synagogue music from the 1930's through the 1950's, and beyond, served the necessary purpose of house cleaning. Greater quartal harmonies and pentatonic textures, attention to modal detail, ~~the~~ yearly cycle of leitmotifs and, in general, the stamp of kashrut to musical content became the norm. The result was a profusion of sensitive settings, considerably more refined and artistically satisfying than those of previous decades. In fact, they hold their own with the best liturgical compositions of any religious denomination during the same period.

But does this "Golden Age" of composition represent progress, a step forward? Certainly the music is sophisticated and reveals to the world at large a kind of coming-of-age. However, this renaissance is also a transplantation of European ideals and sounds to American shores, and, in that respect, it is a step backward. If, indeed, Jewish musicians have been infected in diverse ways by the majority cultures in which they have functioned, perhaps this singular fact should become our guide for the future.

one paragraph Far from being a negative commentary on our musical output or a sign of inherent weakness, such acculturation to other styles and idioms (what Dr. Werner calls "active assimilation") has always signalized our strength. A filtering-out process has transmuted foreign and neighbouring elements into something recognized as being Jewish. It may well be that this on-going interaction of assimilation and transmutation is the real nature of "tradition."

Taken in this sense, tradition then imposes no requirement on today's composer to follow the lead of his immediate predecessors. The music of Helfman, Katchko, Freed, Pinchik, Piket, Roitman and so many others marks a culmination. ~~and synthesis~~. We cannot and we will not improve upon them. But this generation of American composers has grown up in a different environment and has its own exciting destiny. As early as the 'twenties the battle was fought and won in the world of serious concert music. It is the Americanisms of the Coplands that now ring true, not those of the MacDowells: rhythmic exuberance, primarily, but also colorful dissonance, looser form-structure, and the myriad ethnic strands ~~that have~~ woven into ^{our} national fabric. This is the stuff for contemporary synagogue music, not imitations of rock music formulas or Hassidic festival ditties.

In other words, let us strive for the essence of popular song, not its actual substance. Let us not be abashed by our indigenous eclecticism, so potently exploited in the secular music of today. And once and for all, let us recognize that a composer is not a Recreation Director but a Director of Re-Creation of all the sounds ^{is} in his personal past and present. He ^{uses not only} ~~draws upon~~ a God-given talent, but also ~~has~~ ^a technical skills and ~~his~~ mind.

One of the supreme ironies of late twentieth century Jewish culture ^{is} is the denigration of intellectuality in worship music. The issue here is not congregational singing)---(its days has come and it will not be denied)--- versus performance by professionals, but the ascendancy of musical ill^teracy over artistic standards.

Yes, composers have a tough time of it. They are constantly being subjected to a wide spectrum of judgments, ranging from the inciteful to the insightful, from those of the rank amatuer to those of the "Last Hurrah-niks," who c^laim to represent the TRUE tradition. Nussach, for example, is fine as the basis for composition; no one quarrels with that. But, on the other hand, to argue that the absence of nussach from a composition is reason to condemn it as being non-Jewish is not to acknowledge the actual history of our music.

There is a verse by Isaak Walton, the hymnologist, part of which goes as follows:

"Music! miraculous rhetoric that speakest sense
Without a tongue, excelling eloquence;
With what ease might thy errors be excus'd,
Wert thou truly lov'd as thou'rt abus'd!"

That is a sentiment Eric Werner would heartily echo. To him we extend our felicitations and heartfelt wishes for continued good health and productivity. Perhaps his most important message ultimately has been: There is no such thing as Jewish music. Long live the Music of the Jewish People!

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