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THE MUSIC OF CANTOR ROBBIE SOLOMON

KATHRYN A. HASTINGS

Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for Cantorial Investiture

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Advisors: Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman
Dr. Mark Kligman

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CHAPTER 1

"If you cannot concentrate when you pray, search for melodies and choose a tune you like. Then your heart will then feel what you say, for it is the song which makes your heart respond."

(Yehuda ben Samuel of Regensburg in *Sefer Chasidim)*

Composers of contemporary Jewish music, whether secular or liturgical, are searching for respect, and at the very least, inclusion of their work alongside more classical and traditional composers. One musical quality that provides some of today's contemporary composers' credibility is the interweaving of nusach and modal harmony with a contemporary sound. Historically, after all, Jewish music has always adopted and adapted the music of the larger community where Jews reside. One of the very best of today's examples is Cantor Robbie Solomon.

Cantor Solomon has been writing music for thirty years. His musical career, both as a cantor and with the musical group Safam, has given his compositions exposure in both synagogue and secular settings. He has been able to respond musically to the Jewish collective consciousness and speak both to and for several generations of Jewish-Americans.

To explore Cantor Solomon's music, I conducted interviews via phone or e-mail with rabbis, cantors, other Jewish musicians and with Cantor Solomon himself. I attended two concerts to be able to talk to his fans; the people who have listened to and been moved by his music all these years. His awareness of the important events in the lives of Jewish-Americans and then the ability to put that awareness into music puts him

in a very small group of influential Jewish contemporary composers. But to understand the power of his songs, we have to first look back at the culture and the events that have affected the people for whom he writes.

The culture for the Jews in twentieth century America has changed. They started in the tenements and went all the way to having a major political party vice-presidential candidate. As the century opened, the Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe was coming to a close. It would have been difficult to tell the generations apart, either through dress or style of living. That first generation of Jews in New York were crammed into the Lower East Side, trying to make a living and give their children a chance at a better life. The next generations did build better lives for themselves. By the end of the Second World War, Jews had made significant inroads into many areas of American culture. In 1945, Bess Myerson, a first generation Jewish-American, was crowned Miss America, and Hank Greenberg led the Detroit Tigers to win both the American League Pennant and the World Series. The success of writers such as Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer and Irwin Shaw brought Jewish issues into the forefront of American reflections. Both the presence of Holocaust survivors and the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 served to negate and begin to eliminate formal anti-Semitism in the country.

> It was not just in terms of their security and social acceptance that contemporaries viewed the postwar era as a golden age for American Jews; prosperity characterized the period as well. By 1955, Jews of Eastern European background had risen . . . and economic distinctions between the earlier and later immigrants had largely disappeared. Jews had become fundamentally middle class, their proportion in nonmanual occupations exceeding that of the general population. Jews had also moved up in the professions. (Sarna, 2004, 277)

Judaism as a religion also gained recognition among the larger population. It was acceptable and expected that Jews would attend their house of worship on Friday and/or Saturday, as the Christian community did on Sunday. So that brought about a boom in the building of synagogues around the country. "Between 1945 and 1965, well over one thousand synagogues and temples were built or rebuilt . . . ."[1] Jews in larger numbers chose to affiliate with a synagogue and so religion became the route to Jewish identity. But that was about to change with the birth of the next generation of Jews.

After World War II, the baby boom began in America and the birthrate went up for Jews as well. The Jewish children born from 1946 - 1964 are the first post-Holocaust generation. This generation would be different than any so far in Jewish America. Most likely, they are born as American citizens to parents who were born as American citizens. In many cases, the grandparents are American citizens. They would grow up in single-family homes in the suburbs, rather than within walking distance of their grandparents or other extended family. They would grow up in a nation that was accepting Judaism as a legitimate religion. The 1955 publishing of the book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* by Will Herberg attested to this fact. His bestseller declared that American society is comprised these three religions. Jews were seeing the end of anti-Semitism in such things as college quotas.

It could be said of this third generation that,"the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel are widely perceived by Jews to be the two most significant events of the twentieth century, and also to serve as the major foci of contemporary American

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[1] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 279.

Jewish identity."[2] This generation had those two and many other reasons to be able to be publicly proud of being Jewish. As adults, they would be distinguished by successes in education and business. Their significant income puts them in a high economic status and gave them power to affect change. The growing acceptance of Jews and Judaism provided the opportunity to move throughout the country, rather than stay in the traditionally popular Jewish areas.

Education has always been a major tenet of Judaism, and that remained true for this baby-boomer generation. These students were attending Hebrew Sunday school and Jewish day schools in record numbers. There was no consistency in curriculum or quality, but the mere fact of attendance helped to build the Jewish identity of this group. They made Jewish friends, and that helped foster a sense of strength. The Jewish friend base was especially important for there were likely few other Jews in their regular school. A choice often had to be made between synagogue activities and events in the other parts of their lives, and if there is a strong friendship group, the synagogue event will hold more significance. Sharing Jewish experiences, including music, became a very powerful bond for this generation. This emphasis on success in all areas of education helped advance the Jewish community into the mainstream of American culture.

Israel and American Jews

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 gave strength and solidarity to the American Jewish community. The people of Israel clearly needed support from America, but it seemed to be very easy for American Jews to take Israel's existence for granted. In 1967, the next generation of Jews saw that foundation jeopardized by the Six-Day War.

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[2] Chaim I. Waxman, *Jewish Baby Boomers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 4.

This episode reminded the Jews of America that they were still a distinct group that needed to put forth every effort to make sure of their survival. The weeks leading up to the actual attack were a tense and anxious time. When its Arab neighbors threatened Israel, it struck first and solidly defeated all that came against it. But the idea that Israel could be eliminated became a rallying cry for the Jews in the Diaspora. "While Israel's destruction might not endanger the physical security of the American Jew, the psychological effect could be devastating."[3] But, because it was such a resounding victory, the effect was shocking and powerful throughout the world. "Over a quarter-century, it acquired mythic stature, becoming a moment that a generation of American Jews would look back to as a personal watershed."[4]

Soviet Jewry

"The Soviet Jewry [cause] was the thing that kind of drew us together. There [was] nobody who didn't support that."[5] (Cantor Robbie Solomon)

"Across the ocean, the Six-Day War sparked an unexpected and dramatic rebirth of Jewish fervor among the 2 million Jews of the Soviet Union, who defied Communist repression and broke a half-century of silence."[6] The cause of allowing Jews to leave the Soviet Union started as a grassroots effort in the early 1960's. The Jewish community viewed this struggle as their civil rights cause, similar to that which the African-American community was fighting for in the United States. The issue ultimately became a significant objective of the United States government. "By 1972, the Soviet Jewry

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[3] Priscilla Fishman, ed., *The Jews of the United States* (Jerusalem: Ktav Publishing House, 1973), 246.

[4] J.J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 134.

[5] Cantor Robbie Solomon, phone interview with author, 9 January 2006.

[6] Goldberg, *Jewish Power*, 16.

freedom struggle had become a national American Jewish crusade."[7] Hundreds of thousands of people gathered at protests all around the country. In the Soviet Union, many Jews were willing to risk jail or worse to try to get permission to leave. Once their application was denied, they became known as a "refusenik."

One man, Natan Sharansky, became synonymous with this movement. Then known as Anatoly, he became the face of the Jewish "refusenik" movement, those who wanted to be able to leave the Soviet Union and make aliyah to Israel. He was arrested in 1977 and spent thirteen years in prison on trumped-up spying charges. His case was kept in the public eye by his wife and then by a worldwide movement to free him. Finally in 1986, he was freed and enabled to join his wife in Israel.

Ethiopian Airlift

A similar situation was happening for the Jewish community trapped and decimated in Ethiopia. Their numbers had dropped dramatically due to war and hunger. Although Israel was not initially in full support of bringing the Falashas to their country, the American Jewish community took up the cause to get them out safely. For more than twenty years, negotiations and deals were made and then broken as the situation became more and more dire. Israel was convinced to open their doors to this community. The United States government took on the cause, as well. Finally in May 1991, a cease-fire in the civil war was held for 24 hours while Israeli planes took out all 20,000 Ethiopian Jews to their new home.

The Vanishing Jew?

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[7] Ibid., 144.

Prior to the Six-Day War, there had been great concern about the potential disappearance of Jews and Judaism in America. There was even a notable article in the widely read Look magazine in 1964, called "The Vanishing American Jew". But the survival of Israel, the cause of freedom for Soviet Jews and the public acknowledgement of the horrors of the Holocaust brought about a re-emergence of a strong Jewish identity. By the mid-seventies, it was not unusual to see men wearing *kipot* all day, not just pulling them out of a pocket when they arrived at the synagogue. People were taking trips to Israel and weeping at the Western Wall, which was again in Jewish possession. Being vocal and open about being Jewish was becoming common in the United States. But at the same time, this new openness made other Jews uncomfortable. When there is a common enemy, it is vital to stay united. Now the larger population accepted the Jews of the United States, but there were divisions between many different groups – the traditional versus the liberal, and the secular versus the religious, for example. Everyone had their own idea about what it meant to be Jewish and there was no one who had the authority to say if any of them were right or wrong. "While the overall trends continued in the direction of the division of American Jewry into active, maximalist and passive, minimalist elements, with most choosing the latter path, the focus of the Jewish community attention moved toward the former group, who embraced and were embraced by a reinvigorated Jewish identity and involvement."[8] This fact alone gave hope to the Jewish establishment that had valid concerns about the future of Jewish life in the United States. But the real accomplishment was that Jews were firmly established as Americans, both in their own minds and in the collective mind of the American population.

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[8] Samuel C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 89.

Jewish Identity in the late Twentieth century

"The fact remains that the great majority of American Jews, young as well as old are retaining their Jewish identity."[9] (Author Charles Silberman – 1985)

With their place in American society secure, the young Jews began to look at their parents' style of worship. Many Jews gave up on organized religion and became Jewish mostly in ethnicity, except when a lifecycle event brought them back to the synagogue. But those who wanted a regular synagogue experience stayed and began to make changes from the inside. There was no consensus about what was the "real" Jewish religion, as the divisions between Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform continued to grow. But each of them, in their own way, began to respond to the changing needs to their membership.

> It was inevitable that a people finally enfranchised to openly investigate its own past would begin to contribute to its present as well. On college campuses around America, young people with little previous knowledge of or identification with Jewish life and ritual practices publicly began to wear symbols that identified them with Judaism and the Jewish community: the *kippah* (yarmulke/skullcap) replaced the fedora and the baseball cap, while necklaces with six-pointed stars and *chai* (the Hebrew word for "life") charms appeared on young women and men. Jewish foods from bagels to chicken soup entered the national culinary cuisine, and Jewish neuroses – real and caricatured – were portrayed in feature films, television and theater. All that was missing from American Jewish life was the music. (Edelman, 2003, 251)

Jewish music begins to change

Jewish music, particularly the music of the synagogue, had always been subject to outside influences. "The appropriation of melodies from secular folk and popular music and even from non-Jewish sources has a long history in Jewish folk and liturgical music – as it does in other religious music and in all folk music"[10] This is not the forum to pass

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[9] Charles Silberman, *A Certain People*, (New York: Summit Books, 1985) 225.

[10] Robert L. Cohen, "We're Playing Their Song," *Moment Magazine*, August 1994, 56.

judgement on this fact, just to acknowledge that it is true. It has always been a source of controversy and even embarrassment when later generations find out the origins of a tune. One famous example is that the beloved and widely accepted setting of *Ein Keloheinu* is based upon a German church hymn. And for each festival, the tune for *Mi Chamocha* is changed to match the established tune for the festival, such as *Adir Hu* for Pesach. Also, it is universally accepted that *Adon Olam* can be done to any tune, as I learned when my cantor years ago put it to "Auld Lang Syne" on a New Year's Eve Shabbat. So borrowing, changing, adapting and revising is not new to Jewish music, either liturgical or secular.

But the changes that began in the mid- 1960's seem to be more shocking and surprising than the previous changes. The introduction of folk-based music, sometimes even with English lyrics, set the world on its ear. Many of the scholars of Jewish music did not even want to admit that this shift had occurred. Macy Nulman said in a 1968 lecture, subsequently published in 1985, "Secular tunes, Israeli folk song, and the swinging Hassidic song pattern do not belong in a synagogue service."[11] He recommends David Nowakowsky(1849-1921) as a composer who follows the nusach literally throughout all his work. Nowakowsky's works, many of which are quite beautiful, are virtually lost today from the synagogue repertoire, and that is likely to have already been the case in 1968. Nulman was clearly thinking more of a traditional service for his context. Through the use of the different versions of the Union Hymnal, the Reform movement had been accepting of some unison singing for most of the early to mid-twentieth century.

Joseph Levine was no happier about the musical transition in synagoguel music. In 1989, he bemoaned the fact that unison singing had usurped *davening* and that there is even sometimes handclapping during a service.[12] But he accepts the fact that the American synagogue music will be an combination of all the communities where Jews have lived and learned their neighbors' music. As recently as 1994, noted music historian Irene Heskes published a book on the history of Jewish music. She not only has no mention of Debbie Friedman, Jeff Klepper or Robbie Solomon, she doesn't include Ben Steinberg, Simon Sargon or even Shlomo Carlebach. Michael Isaacson shows up in a footnote only because he wrote music to a text she was discussing in a chapter on the Holocaust. Her acknowledgement of the changes that had already occurred as that point is summed up in one sentence. "Youth groups in particular have begun to seek out newer musical styles of Judaic expression, and the quest is somewhat akin to that of the earlier innovative poet-singers and minstrel bards in Jewish music history."[13] But whether any of these scholars wanted to acknowledge it or not, a change had begun and was not going to be stopped. The Babyboomers were growing up and writing the music that their peers wanted to hear and use for prayer. They were also writing secular songs that spoke specifically to Jewish issues and values. "The baby-boomer creators of the music accept, reject, and reshape the Eastern European heritage, showing a younger generation

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[11] Macy Nulman, *Concepts of Jewish Music and Prayer* (New York, Yeshiva University, 1985), 76.
[12] Joseph A. Levine, *Synagogue Song in America* (Crown Point, IN: White Cliff Media Co., 1989) 189.
[13] Irene Heskes, *Passport to Jewish Music* (New York, Tara Publications, 1994), 217.

different ways of accommodating Jewish life and ideals to current challenges."[14] The tide was not to be turned back.

This new generation of Jews had found their collective voice and they were ready to sing with those who put it to music. "The genius of Jewish survival, and its rich history and culture, is that Jews have been able to continually recloak their central texts and ideas in the garments of the surrounding societies."[15] They were facing turbulent times and the music of previous generations was not speaking to them.

One of the primary changes in the style of Reform synagogue music was the move away from strictly performance-based music. In the Classical Reform service, there was a choir and a music director, plus maybe a cantor, and the congregation listened to the prayers being sung at them. "The popularity of synagogue pop-music increased to the point that it began to threaten the classically oriented music of the Reform temples."[16] This new generation was not interested in just listening anymore. They wanted to be able to participate in many ways, and they especially wanted to sing as part of their worship experience. "The importance of music in synagogue services has long been appreciated, of course, and much of the revival currently under way in the American synagogue can without a doubt be attributed to the introduction of American, Israeli, and Hasidic

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[14] Dr. Mark Kligman, "Contemporary Jewish Music in America." in *American Jewish Year Book* 2001 (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2001), 140.

[15] Daniel Schifrin, "Name That Tune," *The Jewish Week* (New York), 28 November 1997, 66.

[16] Dr. Eliyahu Schleifer, "Current Trends of Liturgical Music in the Ashkenazi Synagogue" in *The World of Music*, 37/1, 1995, 68.

melodies that have proved to have broad appeal."[17] Whether the prayers were in English, Hebrew or a combination of both, the music now carried the prayers for the congregants.

The parents of the Babyboomers wanted their children to have the opportunity to establish a strong Jewish identity, and many were financially secure enough to send their teens to Reform summer camps. "It was in the summer camps that Reform young people, Jewishly invigorated by their camp experience, set off a revolution in liturgical music that would eventually transform Reform synagogue services across American."[18] The teens sat around a campfire or at lakeside with their guitars and had a spiritual experience unlike anything they had ever had in a synagogue. When they returned home, they wanted it to be like camp, and slowly, that influence began to take hold of the music. "Young people who sang spirited folk tunes and neo-Hasidic melodies in summer camps and youth services were not happy in their parents' synagogues, singing their grandparents' songs."[19] All churches and synagogues were struggling to respond to the cultural changes going on in the United States. The music was not the biggest or only problem plaguing houses of worship, but the music was an easy one to focus on and try to change. For the Reform synagogues, all they had to do was ask the teens whose music they were singing at camp and incorporate that into the service. It sounds like a simple procedure, but change is scary under the best of circumstances. When the Rabbis and Cantors felt they were being forced to change, they did so begrudgingly. Reform clergy were comfortable with the "traditional" music of composers such as Binder and Freed,

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[17] Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000) 170.

[18] Kligman, "Contemporary Jewish Music in America," 117.

where the cantor and the choir sang and the congregation listened to the music. They weren't familiar with the new composer names that were being promoted by their young members. Many different composers were trying their hand at this new genre of music to appeal to the new sensibilities of the congregants. Cantor Raymond Smolover wrote a folk/rock service in 1968 called *The Edge of Freedom.* While it has not remained as part of the musical lexicon, it was a huge influence on the next generation of contemporary composers. Charles Davidson put a rock beat to a Selichot service called *The Hush of Midnight* in 1970. He combined the traditional *Mi-Sinai* tunes for the High Holidays with a more contemporary sound and arrangement. These pioneers opened the door for different styles of composers. Some of them abandoned the organ completely for the guitar and others wrote music that would work for either or both instruments. But there was one man who wrote music that crossed all boundaries and influenced every area of Jewish music. That man was Shlomo Carlebach.

Shlomo Carlebach (1925 – 1994) was born in Germany and escaped to America with his family in 1938. He was ordained as an Orthodox Rabbi, but soon took on the teachings and the lifestyle of the Lubavitcher Hasidim. His job was to travel to college campuses to promote Judaism, via the Hassidic style, and the observance of the *mitzvot.* He encouraged and taught that God should be worshipped with spirit and joy. He did this best through Hassidic teachings and his own simple and catchy songs. He began this ministry in the 1950's, but it took time for his reputation to build across the country. In 1959, he released his first album and became an "overnight" success. "Though he could

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[19] Marsha Bryan Edelman. *Discovering Jewish Music* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2003) 139.

not read music and had no formal technical training, he became, over the next thirty-five years, the most influential and prolific composer of Jewish religious music in the twentieth century."[20] The songs were easily learned because they were short with generally known texts. They quickly made an impact on the liturgical music being used in the synagogues, although he didn't always write them for that purpose. His influence was felt throughout the Jewish music world, and even beyond it. He appeared at a secular folk festival in 1966 and found an additional following among Jews who had been estranged from Judaism. His music brought the folk music style into the synagogue, invigorating this next generation. He recorded 25 albums and left behind a legacy of approximately one thousand songs. "So quickly and completely did his music penetrate the Jewish world that many who hear or sing the tunes assume they are traditional melodies; they have no idea that Carlebach created them."[21] Composers from all the Jewish movements name Carlebach as a significant influence on their music. His was a unique style, both based on performance and also group participation. It is a style that many after him have worked to recreate, with differing levels of success. Carlebach was the first and, by many accounts, the best at making everyone feel that they were each a vital part of the performance.

One way that synagogues have tried to give their congregants the opportunity to both perform and participate is through choral singing. Largely through the efforts of Matthew Lazar of the Zamir Choral Foundation and Joshua Jacobson of the Zamir Chorale of Boston, Jewish choral singing has been supported and encouraged for those

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[20] Sarna, 346.

[21] Kligman, 102.

Jews who want to be a part of making music together. The North American Jewish Choral Festival meets for a week each summer and brings together Jews from all denominations to sing quality Jewish choral music. The Festival was started in 1989 and has grown in both attendance and notoriety every year. In 1994, there was a survey of Reform synagogues about their worship and music practices. The survey noted that there had begun to be a resurgence of interest in adult choral singing. "Congregational choirs allow for individual adult Jews to express their Jewish spirituality through music – and to keep a uniquely Reform tradition alive."[22] One of the authors of that survey report wears many hats in the Jewish music world. Rabbi Daniel Freelander was one of the founders of the North American Jewish Choral Festival and also is a composer and singer in the group *Kol B'Seder* with Cantor Jeff Klepper. But he, too, struggles with the issue of how to combine performance and participation. He wrote about this in a 1996 article in the Journal *Sh'ma.* In this article, he says how fulfilling he knows that it can be to sing as part of a choral group performing for an audience or a congregation. But then he thinks of the song sessions that happen at UAHC (now URJ) Biennials, and other large Jewish events. "They remind us babyboomers of our youth days singing together at summer camp, on the college campus or at the protest rally. Those were special and spiritual moments these adult communal singing sessions recreate for us. Our souls open up, and we sing familiar sounding melodies and words, and feel comfortably connected once again to our community and to our God."[23] This is the most prayerful time for him, when

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[22] Daniel Freelander, Robin Hirsch, and Sanford Seltzer, *Emerging Worship and Music Trends In UAHC Congregations* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1994), 22.

[23] Daniel Freelander, "The Role of Jewish Communal Singing" *Sh'ma* 27/518 (October 4, 1996): 6.

he knows that the music is what connects the Jews to each other and to their own Judaism.

"Jewish music professionals in our own time continue to debate the question of what music speaks to contemporary congregants, and composers from the right, left and center offer new tunes to worshippers hungry for the spiritual 'fix' that *shirah b'tzibbur* (congregational singing) offers."[24] With that in mind, what are the scholars saying about this next phase of Jewish music? Cantor and composer Benjie Ellen Schiller did an important study in 1992 on the music in the Reform Synagogue in the 20th century through a discussion of the contents of different hymnals. She speculated about what would happen next to Jewish music, that conceivably the music would become a combination of all the music that has been a part of the movement so far. The popular music will continue to appeal to people who are looking to actively participate in their worship experience. But the music of the past should not be lost as an important genre. "Congregations will grow more and more accustomed to participating in many kinds of Jewish music as they grow to appreciate the more formal styles of the past, the traditionalism of modern solo chazzanut, and the richness of a tradition that goes beyond the moment."[25] She hoped that the music could continue to grow and expand to meet the needs of most, if not all, of the congregants.

Eleven years later, Jewish music historian Dr. Marsha Bryan Edelman wrote about the history of Jewish music and also discussed thoughts about what the 21st century will

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[24] Marsha Bryan Edelman, "Some thoughts on identity and Jewish music", *Sh'ma* 27/518 (October 4, 1996): 2.

bring for Jewish music. She is optimistic that the majority of the people can be happy with what is happening today. She describes a particular setting of the evening prayer *"Ahavat Olam"* by Aminadav Aloni (1928 – 1999). According to Edelman, the Aloni setting, published in 1986 by Transcontinental Music Publications, is a successful combination of the Mi-Sinai melody to be sung by a choir, the congregation and a cantor solo.

> In many ways, Aloni's setting of *Ahavat Olam* summarizes all the possible permutations of American synagogue music and offers something for everyone. The cantor and choir lead, but the congregation sings along; the treatment is fresh and contemporary; but the "tune" is as traditional, universal, and accessible as any in the Ashkenazic liturgy. In this regard, it also summarizes much of Western synagogue music history and this may serve as a model for composers and congregations of the future. (Edelman, 2003, 147)

Composer Samuel Adler does not necessarily share the optimism of Cantor Schiller and Dr. Edelman about the future of Jewish music. But he does feel there is hope if composers take on the challenge to make the music all that it can be. "Concerned musicians must seize the moment and formulate a sacred sound that is at once rooted in several genuine traditions that constitute our religious past and fashioned, not for some other time and place, but for the contexts in which we ourselves live."[26] One composer who has been striving to meet this challenge for nearly thirty years is American born Robbie Solomon.

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[25] Benjie Ellen Schiller, " The Hymnal as an Index of Musical Change in Reform Synagogues," in *Sacred Sound and Social Change*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 210.

[26] Samuel Adler, "Sacred Music in a Secular Age," in *Sacred Sound and Social Change*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Janet R. Walton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 299.

CHAPTER 2

Music, Judaism and social justice – these are the three issues that have driven Robbie Solomon throughout his life. His career choices have allowed him to have all three of these causes play a prominent role in his life, with music as the vehicle for the other two. Solomon has left his mark on the Jewish music world by writing the songs with messages that Jews wanted to hear. After thirty years of writing, his music is heard today in synagogues, on concert stages, recordings, and on college campuses throughout this country and around the world. The success of his Purim cantata *The Orphan Queen* meant that his work would now be seen on the theatrical stage as well. This cantata allowed Solomon to combine his contemporary music and cantorial expertise in one show.

To fully explore Cantor Solomon's music, one must first look at his background and early experiences, as they greatly influenced his career and musical choices. Then, while his music cannot necessarily be categorized, there are a number of genres which can serve as a framework for researching the vast body of his compositions. This chapter is divided into five sections to discuss the music in more detail. These five sections are synagogue works, secular pieces, Safam in concert, commissioned works and *The Orphan Queen*. We will focus on a few representative works in each area. The volume and quality of his music will be more than evident by the end of this chapter.

Solomon's Formative Years

Robbie Solomon was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1947. While his parents were not musicians, there was always music being played in the house. There were show tunes and opera solos in his head from a very young age. He particularly liked listening

to an opera compilation album by Mario Lanza. He spent his earliest years in Beth Jacob Congregation, a Modern Orthodox synagogue. Once his musical talent was discovered, he was asked to sing duets with a classmate. The synagogue was a busy place and Solomon found the activities exciting. He wanted to learn more about music, so he started piano lessons. He began to try out his singing talent in more places. At age twelve, he sang "*Eliyahu Hanavi*" seeking to win a spot on the *Ted Mack Amateur Hour*, but his audition was not successful. Before his voice changed, he was able to work for three years as a paid High Holiday boy soloist for Petach Tikveh Congregation.

The man and the musician that Solomon has become was really formed during his teen years. He began guitar lessons at age 13, and quickly added other string instruments to his list of talents. Folk music was all the rage as this was the middle 1960's. These skills gave him the ability to join a jug band, playing the music of Joan Baez and the Kingston Trio, among others. The seeds were planted in his mind that music and activism should go together because music could move people and get them stirred up. His first big cause was the Civil Rights movement, which he was very involved in throughout high school. In 1963, his last year in school, he had a profound experience that solidified his activist spirit. He and some friends went from Baltimore to Washington D.C. for a huge march and rally. They ended up being part of history as they were there to hear Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. Solomon remembers that their cab driver didn't charge them for the ride from the bus to the reflecting pool because he, too, wanted to do his part for civil rights.

His high school years also confirmed his interest in and love of Judaism. In addition to regular school, he studied in a pluralistic Jewish academic program at

Baltimore Hebrew College. This was his first exposure to the non-Orthodox Jewish world. This knowledge turned out to be very beneficial a few years later. Solomon's career plans did not initially include Judaism or music. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1968, and thought he would continue with science in graduate school. But the draft for the Vietnam War was no longer giving deferments for men in graduate school. They were, however, still giving them for Rabbinical School, so Solomon applied to and was accepted by Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, OH. He specifically picked HUC because he wanted a more liberal Jewish institution. Because of his training in the Baltimore Hebrew program, he was able to test out of many of the first year classes. His second year of school found him on the HUC campus in Jerusalem. But after that year, he knew that rabbinic school was not the place for him. He was playing music in a blues band all around Jerusalem and decided music was the direction for him. Composing was not originally part of his plan, but he was asked by a friend to write music for some original poems and that began his composing career.

Knowing he needed classical music training, Solomon spent four years studying at the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem. He was in the choir, so he tried his hand at arranging music. In 1971-72, he arranged the George Gershwin song " There's a Big Boat Leaving for New York". Stanley Sperber, the Rubin Academy choir director, was in contact with people in Zamir Chorale of New York and Zamir Chorale of Boston. He thought it was a quality arrangement, so he sent it to both groups. Zamir Chorale of Boston director Joshua Jacobson remembers very clearly that it "was such a great arrangement, [so] we did that piece." [1] The arrangement has a special place in Solomon's

[1] Dr. Joshua Jacobson, phone interview with the author, 10 January 2006.

and Safam's history. "It's actually the first piece of mine done in the U.S. The guys in Safam sang it a couple of years before they met me."[2]

He returned to the United States and studied for a year at Berklee College of Music in Boston. He added the flute to his musical instrument list that year. He first taught music in religious school and then began to get opportunities to serve as a cantorial soloist. He started learning the skills necessary for the cantorial world with the same dedication he gave to his other musical studies. Ultimately, he earned his certification to join the Cantors Assembly in 1984 and then the American Conference of Cantors in 1990. Cantor Rhoda J.H. Silverman says, "I feel his music is a wonderful blend of modernity and tradition in an accessible yet still classy (I can't think of a better word - it elevates worship, it's not kitchy) manner." [3]

Solomon had never stopped loving folk music, although he was training as a traditional cantor. He loved the music of Shlomo Carlebach and found great inspiration in its accessibility. Solomon began singing in Zamir Chorale of Boston and met three men in an already established band that had formed in 1974. An original member left, so in the fall of 1975, Solomon joined Safam. Founding member Joel Sussman said, "It was like we were good and needed a genius, so we got Robbie."[4] They were all excited about the possibility of taking the Hassidic and Israeli style of music that they all loved and making it into what they now call Jewish-American music. Cantor Brad Hyman fell in love with the music as a young man singing in his temple's junior choir. To him, the music was Jewish Rock-n-Roll. While he didn't know how to classify the music at that

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[2] Cantor Robbie Solomon, e-mail to the author, 4 April 2005.

[3] Cantor Rhoda J. H. Silverman, E-mail to the author, 29 November 2005.

young age, he felt "this music is speaking to me in a new and different way that I didn't even know existed."[5] There would be music in English with Jewish themes. "American Jews discussed their Jewish identities in English; it was natural for them to sing at least some of their Jewish songs in English as well."[6] Liturgical music is certainly part of their repertoire, but the group became known for their songs that talked about what Jewish Americans were thinking about at that time. This was the perfect outlet for Solomon to finally put all his loves together.

> Robbie is a composer who knows not only what makes a melody work, but also how to put the little pieces together to make a large unit that makes sense. The drama of a larger piece of music is something that he's also comfortable with. He knows how the pieces fit together, and I find that his music, while pleasant to listen to, is not just pop music. I think it has substance to it. His lyrics are strong, he has a good sense of harmony. It's good quality.
>
> (Dr. Joshua Jacobson, Director, Zamir Chorale of Boston)[7]

Solomon in the synagogue

"I believe that his music is a wonderful blend of contemporary sound, combined with a great respect for the nusach – a terrific combination in my opinion!"[8] (Cantor Dana Anesi)

Solomon's music has become part of the musical lexicon in both the Conservative and Reform movements. While the music he writes for Safam is more secular, he has set many texts through the years. He always thinks about the performance aspect of a piece, but does not try to decide for anyone else if the setting is appropriate for usage on the bima. And that decision is subjective, depending on the person making the choice. For example, when questioning cantors about pieces of his that they use, several mentioned

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[4] Michael Gelbwasser, "Safam at 20: Still making music, having fun and winning fans after all these years," *The Jewish Advocate* (Boston), 1 February 1996, 17.

[5] Cantor Brad Hyman, phone interview with the author, 9 January 2006.

[6] Marsha Bryan Edelman, *Discovering Jewish Music* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003) 259.

[7] Dr. Joshua Jacobson, phone interview with author, 10 January 2006.

using part or all of his *Hallel Suite*, particularly his setting of "*Pitchu Li*". [9] (The Hallel Blessing is a joint work by Solomon and Sussman, and Sussman wrote the setting of Psalm 118, but the rest is solely Solomon.) Cantor Brad Hyman mentioned this Suite as one of his favorites, because of the way it flows together.[10] When discussing the contributions of Safam as a whole to Jewish music, Dr. Marsha Bryan Edelman used the *Hallel Suite* as an example of the two composers' ability to weave together many different styles. But according to her, the *Hallel Suite* is strictly for performance and not for use in the synagogue.[11]

While Solomon has set much of the liturgy, there are certain pieces that have become particularly popular. His 1999 setting of the healing prayer "*Mi Shebeirach*" was published in the Synagogue 2000 compilation *Refuah Sh'leimah*, so it has become a new favorite for some cantors.[12] That was the choice for one of the *Ma'ariv* services during the 2005 American Conference of Cantors convention in New Orleans, LA. Other pieces mentioned frequently by rabbis, cantors, and other Jewish musicians included "*Modim Anachnu Lach*", "*Al Hanisim*", "*Anim Z'mirot*", "*Eitz Chayim Hi*", and "*Yah Ribon Alam*". The setting of "*Yah Ribon Alam*" has gained notoriety because it is on a recording by Zamir Chorale of Boston.[13]

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[8] Cantor Dana Anesi, E-mail to the author, 29 November 2005.

[9] Cantor Ida Rae Cahana - 29 November 2005, Cantor Regina Hayut – 13 December 2005, Cantor Peter Halpern – 3 January 2006. E-mails to author.

[10] Hyman.

[11] Edelman, p. 257.

[12] Merri Lovinger Arian, ed., *Refuah Sh'leimah* (New York: Synagogue 2000, 2002) 85 – 87.

[13] Zamir Chorale of Boston. *The Soul of the Sabbath*, Zamir Chorale of Boston HZ – 915, 2001, CD.

"*Yismechu*", the most-mentioned setting, has been published in an octavo[14] and in Shabbat Anthology Volume I[15] by Transcontinental Music Publications, the publishing arm of the Union for Reform Judaism. This piece was written in 1980 for the tenth anniversary of the Rabbi at Temple Sinai in Sharon, MA where Solomon was Cantor. "I based it on the traditional *Yismechu*, the one that everybody does, ... with the chorus coming back and the three verses, and then the recitative in the middle."[16] It was released on the Safam album *Bittersweet*.[17] Cantor Ida Rae Cahana of Central Synagogue in New York City, among others, said, "Another favorite setting is the Sephardic style "*Yismechu*" which I have used both during services and for concerts."[18] It is very popular in the Reform movement, but not as much in the Conservative synagogues. When asked what he believes makes this piece stand out among so many that he has written, Solomon said, "it covers the kind of thing that people like - it has a lively rhythm, the melody's fun, and it has that cantorial thing (recitative)."[19] While other pieces have the same elements, the combination of this text and the setting clearly has been a success in the synagogue realm for Solomon.

Solomon and secular music

"The music that he does is very intelligent, it is not shlock. He uses colors and musically speaks in a free and easy manner."[20] (Cantor Brad Hyman)

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[14] Robbie Solomon, *Yismechu*, New York: Transcontinental Music Publications 993173, octavo 2001.
[15] J. Mark Dunn & Joel N. Eglash, ed., *Shabbat Anthology Volume I*, New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2001, 31 – 35.
[16] Robbie Solomon, phone interview with the author, 11 January 2006.
[17] Safam, *Bittersweet*, Newton Centre, MA: Safam CD-B70S79, 1983, CD.
[18] Cahana.
[19] Solomon, 11 January 2006.
[20] Hyman.

The secular music that Solomon has written either on his own or with Joel Sussman includes some of the most well known songs of the late twentieth century. "Most of the Sussman/Solomon collaborations focus on the same themes: the Jewish life cycle, love songs for wives and children, biblical storytelling, social activism, Jewish history, Zionism and Jewish values."[21] It is the music that an entire generation of Jews has memories of singing at many important events in their lives. "Music heard or performed whether in the synagogue or concert hall, around the campfire or the family table, gives expression to thoughts of profound depths and more importantly provides a catharsis for emotion of even greater depth."[22] There are very profound feelings tied up with so many of Solomon's songs, but five of them stand out as the most significant of his works.

"Leaving Mother Russia" is the song that really brought Solomon (and Safam) national popularity and ultimately, international recognition. As discussed in Chapter 1, the cause to free the Jews of the Soviet Union was bringing together the American Jewish community. Solomon was particularly affected by the speech made by Natan (then Anatoly) Sharansky when he was arrested. It was an impassioned speech, with Sharansky speaking to the people of the world. "It was real strong language, he told it like it was, and I just loved it, so I said I have to write a song about this."[23] He wrote it in a 24-hour period, and always felt that the song was sent through him to help the cause, so he has never taken any royalties for it. All the money went to organizations to help free the prisoners. He taught it to the Safam band members on the way to a concert at Rutgers

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[21] Ben Jacobson, "Might be Time for a Shave", *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 July 2004, 24.
[22] Matthew Lazar, "We are the Music Makers", *Sh'ma*, 4 October 1996, 3.
[23] Solomon, 11 January 2006.

in 1978, and premiered it that night. When the lyrics say to stand up, the crowd instinctively did and they have been ever since. "For three years in a row in the early 1980's, Safam sang "Leaving Mother Russia" at mass protest rallies at the United Nations, and since then the group has often sung the song as an encore at its concerts."[24] Those rallies had more than 200,000 people standing and singing the song, which became the anthem for the movement. Rabbi Howard Jaffe remembers it being played "at rallies, at a lot of youth group, you know, NFTY kind of events where we would try to keep (the cause) in kids' consciousness and awareness, and synagogue life generally sometimes too, to utilize it as a tool for consciousness."[25] Many cantors have powerful memories associated with this song. Cantor Alison Wissot writes, " I sang 'Leaving Mother Russia' with Cantor Nate Lam while I was growing up at Stephen S. Wise Temple in L.A. We did it a few times, and every time the crowd was moved and in tears. It was one of the pieces I got to sing that led me to the cantorate, I suppose, as singing it combined my love of music with my need to make a difference in the world."[26] While he took no money for it, Solomon feels he has personally received so many benefits from it, including a thank-you letter from Natan's wife, Avital Sharansky. It continues to be a song mentioned when people talk about the freeing of Jews. As recently as April 2003, Babaganewz, the magazine for teen Jews, featured it as one of the important contemporary songs that could be used for a Pesach Seder. They talked about the history of the song and Sharansky's experiences. "By singing about the spiritual strength that Sharansky drew from Judaism,

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[24] Mark Kligman. "Contemporary Jewish Music in America." in *American Jewish Year Book* 2001 (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2001), 126.

[25] Rabbi Howard Jaffe, phone interview with author, 19 January 2006.

[26] Cantor Alison Wissot, E-mail to the author, 3 January 2006.

Safam inspires us to cling firmly to our tradition and to take pride in being Jewish."[27] Cantor Brad Hyman, too, remembers moments singing this song, "I just remember doing that [song] and having it be so powerful to me. That's a special piece for me."[28] It is a special piece for an entire generation of Jews.

"Leaving Mother Russia" spoke about a particular issue, so Solomon became the composer that people looked to when they had a message to convey. In 1983, he was approached to write a song about Yamit by people who had been there and wanted the story publicized. Solomon studied the situation and tried to tell it from the residents' point of view. "I didn't have any political feelings about [Yamit], but the pathos of the people struck me as something I could relate to."[29] There are varying opinions as to whether the song is out of date, but Solomon believes the song still has value because it represents how anyone feels when they have to leave a place that they have built from nothing.

"Falasha Nevermore" was another requested piece by people who were involved with the fundraising to help the Ethiopian immigrants who had arrived in Israel. The song was written in 1986 after Operation Moses, the first airlift to save the refugees. When he thought about the composition of the piece, he thought about the walking, even trudging, that these people were having to do to meet the airlift. With that in mind, he put in a plodding piano line to open the piece. He chose to write it in a pentatonic scale because he felt that was right for an African kind of music. Cantor Lisa Levine uses this piece successfully with a non-Jewish group called the Diversity Chorus. " I just have

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[27] Avi West and Jackie Land, "Let Freedom Ring, Rock and Roll", *Babaganewz.com*, April 2003.
[28] Hyman.

been using it for years and years and years. I just think it is a great song for interfaith work. I want something in English, I want something that Black people can relate to, and they can relate to that and I've used that song so much."[30]

Solomon is particularly proud of his 1980 song "World of Our Fathers". The title came from a book by Irving Howe that talked about immigrants' stories. So Solomon interviewed his own family, and also had the Safam members interview their families and made a composite story from all of them. Dr. Marsha Bryan Edelman used this song as her example of one of the best of the English-language Jewish songs. "The popular American folk-song style of its verses contrasts dramatically with the klezmer-style refrain, ironically linking traditional Jewish practices and identification to a musical style of the past while telling its story in a modern and 'foreign' musical style."[31] Whether it is used in a concert, or as a sermon anthem, it speaks to people of a world that is gone, but is part of their collective memory.

The secular song that was most mentioned is the title track from Safam's sixth album "Peace by Piece".[32] They actually had already named the album, and needed a title track, so Solomon wrote the song. He was thinking along the Bob Dylan style for the original album track, but when he did the choral arrangement, it became a more gospel-style work. It is particularly popular for interfaith and multi-cultural events. Many cantors have used it, either as a solo or with their volunteer choirs. Teen choirs, such as the Ramaz (Jewish High School) Chamber Chorus, who performed it at the 2005

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[29] Joseph Berkovsky, "Rockers rooted in Jewish tradition to hold S.F. debut", *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, 3 March 1995, 36.

[30] Cantor Lisa Levine, phone interview with the author, 9 January 2006.

[31] Edelman, *Discovering Jewish Music*, 260.

[32] Safam, *Peace by Piece*, Newton, Centre, MA: Safam CD-12574, 1984, CD.

North American Jewish Choral Festival, use it. The Festival of Choirs concert presented every year on the Upper West Side of New York City used it as their nine-choir opening piece in December 2004. That concert is held at Congregation Rodeph Sholom and their Senior Cantor, Rebecca Garfein, is a big fan of the piece. She put the song on her most recent CD *Golden Chants in America*. This is from her liner notes.

> Many of the modern Jewish melodies on this album demonstrate the broad talent that exists among American Jewish composers. "Peace by Piece" is no exception to this rule. Cantor Robbie Solomon has written extensively for the American synagogue. His "Peace by Piece" written in a gospel style, is a terrific example of a truly universal anthem that expresses commitment to social action with the ultimate goal being peace.[33]

Cantor Marshall Portnoy loves the song's "energy, excitement and rhythm. A generally universal and particularly Jewish message."[34] Cantor Sarah Sager uses it as a piece her adult and junior choirs can sing together. "We used it for a Chanukah Shabbat and then we used it for a Mitzvah Day program for an inner city nursing home. The choral groups love to sing it, and it is always enthusiastically received."[35] Christian groups have also used it for that same reason. "A Florida evangelical group from the Tampa area was very enamored of that song," said Solomon.[36] So Solomon has written a song that is fun to sing and great to hear, with a powerful message. That is why it was the most mentioned song of them all.

Jewish music has always been popular on college campuses. Jewish a cappella groups began to be formed in 1986, the first one being Pizmon at Columbia University in

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[33] Cantor Rebecca Garfein, Liner notes to *Golden Chants in America*, New York: Bari Productions Inc., 2005, 11.

[34] Cantor Marshall Portnoy, E-mail to author, 29 December 2005.

[35] Cantor Sarah Sager, E-mail to author, 27 December 2005.

[36] Cantor Robbie Solomon, e-mail to author, 11 January 2006.

New York City.[37] A number of groups have incorporated many of the Safam songs into their repertoire. Solomon's Hanukkah song "Judah Macabee" had some years of popularity. "*Anim Zmirot*" was specifically written to be used by an a cappella choir. It has "the bim-boms (that) would be like the organ part".[38] *Kol HaLayla*, the group at Rutgers University, does a number of his pieces because Safam has a special connection to Rutgers. Safam member Dan Funk's father, Rabbi Julius Funk, was the founder of the Rutgers Hillel, so Safam performs an annual concert there.

Safam in concert

"I saw the first concert in 1976 and I was very moved by it. I have been to about a dozen concerts over the years."[39] (Longtime Safam fan Harvey Weiss)

Solomon's music has the ability to tug at people's emotions, and that is very clearly seen at a Safam concert. I had the opportunity to attend two of them in 2005. While they were different venues needing two very different set lists, the similarities were immediately obvious. The band's audience is primarily made up of their peers, the Jewish-Americans who have grown up with the music. A significant number of audience members sang along on virtually everything and called out specific requests for their favorites. Each concert had a young group there, and while they were unfamiliar with the music, joined in the singing by the end of each show.

February 27, 2005 was the 29th annual Safam concert at Rutgers University Hillel. As mentioned above, this concert and this place hold a great deal of significance for the band and the audience. This was the show in 1978 where "Leaving Mother Russia" was

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[37] Sarah Bronson, "Melodic Convergence", *The Jewish Week* (New York) 11 March 2004, accessed on 15 January 2006 at www.thejewishweek.com.

[38] Solomon, phone interview with author, 11 January 2006.

[39] Harvey Weiss, interview with author, 27 February 2005.

performed for the first time. There were several people in the crowd who had been there for all twenty-nine shows. This was a Sunday afternoon concert with many families in attendance. One woman I spoke to had come with her husband for seventeen straight years. She admires the whole group for their longevity, and still loves to hear their music. Another concertgoer was a woman in her seventies that had come by herself and was knitting during the intermission. She sings in a local Jewish community choir and loves their music, so she comes nearly every year.

Longtime fan Harvey Weiss (quoted above) was eager to talk about his love of the group and the music. He especially mentioned Solomon's 1983 song "My Beloved" as one of his all-time favorites. He, too, mentioned the fact that the members of Safam have devoted so much of their lives to making Jewish music. The liturgical music is important to him because he has served as a lay cantor, and likes to sing it. He was quick to say that he did not have the voice of Solomon or any of the others, and so he appreciates their musical gifts, as well. "I am proud that there is music that good that is done by Jews for Jews."[40]

The concerts are comfortable for Jews of all denominations. As on their recordings, they never say anything that will offend the audience. They were careful to respect the pluralistic nature of the crowd, so it was always *Hashem*, *Elokeinu* and *Kel*. The concert was two acts with the Rutgers a cappella group performing during the intermission. The Solomon selections in the first act were "Wings of Love", "Psalm 29 (*Havu L'Adonai*)," *"L'cha Dodi"*, and "Falasha Nevermore". During the intermission, while the Rutgers group was singing, the four band members were in the back selling

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[40] Ibid.

CDs and reminiscing with their long-time fans. It was comfortable and familiar for them all. The second act was the real chance to get a sense of the crowd because the band took requests from them. The first request was for "Grandfather's Train", which was the 1993 Solomon/Sussman follow-up to "Leaving Mother Russia". The crowd clearly knew this song and clapped several times within the piece. At this point, Dan Funk pointed out a woman named Pam, who was singing along on every song, as she was one of those who had perfect attendance at the Safam Rutgers show. Other Solomon songs done during the request portion of the show were *"Mah Nishtana"* (1986), *"Amar Rabi Elazar"* (1984), and *"Yamit"* (1983). I heard others of his yelled out, including *"Al Hanisim"* (1986), "Jonathan" (1989), and "Leaving Mother Russia" (1978). After doing their theme song "After All These Years" composed by Sussman, the band left the stage to huge applause. They returned to the stage and dedicated their encore to the elderly Rabbi Funk, who was in attendance, as was his great-granddaughter Chloe Funk. The encore was Solomon's 1980 "World of Our Fathers". The chorus had everyone in the crowd clapping and singing, and sent them home smiling and happy.

The second concert I attended was on August 7, 2005 in Lenox, MA. Because all of the men in Safam are from the Boston area, this was practically a hometown concert. This was a Sunday evening concert in a high school theater. One section of the side was filled with young people, mostly 8th and 9th graders, from the nearby Eisner Camp who had been given tickets to come. With the exception of the Eisner kids, the audience was virtually all age forty plus, with the majority being in their fifties and sixties. This concert was a fundraiser, so tickets were more expensive. The dedicated Safam fans were again out in force. I spoke to Lynn Denmark, who remembers playing the band's

music on Friday afternoons while making challah for Shabbat. She liked listening to it and thought it was a good influence on her children. She even used a quote from "World of Our Fathers" on her son's Bar Mitzvah invitation.[41] The set list included non-Safam songs, and even had a long skit where they did the ten worst tunes for Adon Olam. But many of Solomon's best-known songs were played including "World of Our Fathers", "Falasha Nevermore", *"Anim Zmirot"*, *"Pitchu Li"*, and *"Yamit"*. The encore spot again belonged to Solomon, this time with the legendary "Leaving Mother Russia". The audience was on their feet even before the lyrics asked them to do that. It was a powerful moment and I shuddered as I thought of what it must have been like to have been among those 200,000 Jews on the UN Plaza singing the song decades ago. This encore left the audience smiling, but I suspect with a different feeling than what "World of Our Fathers" had brought for those people in NJ.

Both concerts were heavily weighted toward the secular songs in English, which comprised fifty percent of the pieces used in the shows. The four Solomon songs that were done at both shows were "Psalm 29", "Falasha Nevermore", *"Yamit"* and "World of Our Fathers", nothing liturgical at all, and only one piece of his in Hebrew. The group has a huge repertoire and they pick the songs that will work best in the specific venue. They don't do as many concerts any more, so they are very special times for the audience and the group.

Commissioning Robbie Solomon

"I think Robbie's been really successful at taking the traditional styles of music and making them accessible. He certainly uses all the styles so successfully and that's what I love about his music."[42] (Cantor Lisa Levine)

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[41] Lynn Denmark, interview with author, 7 August 2005.

[42] Levine, phone interview with author, 9 January 2006.

Over the years, a number of people have commissioned Solomon to write for a specific occasion and/or to set a special text. He wrote a Torah service at the request of Cantorial Intern Judith Zelson when she was at Temple Beth-El in Northbrook, IL. "The Torah service is very nice. We tended to use more of this service on holidays and special occasions, but occasionally on Shabbat, also."[43] He has several other major commissions to his credit. For their 1988 convention, the Cantors Assembly asked him to write a Ma'ariv daily service, which he dedicated to his late mother, Shirley. (See Chapter 3 for an in-depth look at one of the pieces from that service.)

1989 brought another big opportunity to write more liturgical music. Cantor Linda Shivers of Congregation Neveh Shalom, a conservative temple in Portland, Oregon had him write a Friday night service to coincide with the debut of their new prayerbook, *Oneg Shabbat*. The service, called *Zimrat Shalom* (A Song of Peace), was written for the synagogue's 120th anniversary. She knew his work and him personally, and never considered anyone else for the commission. Solomon called upon his knowledge of the traditional nusach to write this service.

> Of course, writing for a Conservative Synagogue, I used many elements from the Friday night nusach. But more than that, I intended to give an overall consistent mood to the service, so I wrote every setting with a common element—the interval of a perfect fifth. I remembered something that my teacher Dahlia Cohen from the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem said in our class on Comparative Religious Music. She said that if you stand outside of a traditional synagogue and listen to the people dhavenning

[43] Cantorial Intern Judith Zelson, e-mail to author, 30 November 2005.

inside, invariably the most common interval between voices will be a perfect fifth. So that became the glue that made the service into one whole composition. Other than that, the settings vary in style and in difficulty: from a very simple *"Ahavat Olam"*, to a challenging "May The Words/*Yih'yu*".[44]

Solomon asked to hear Cantor Shivers' voice because he wanted to write it for her range. "There are things in it that just sound fabulous because they were written for me," said Cantor Shivers.[45] She uses the *"V'Ahavta"* and *"Vay'chulu"* settings from it frequently, and about every year or two does the whole service.[46] "There are so many pieces of his that are so wonderful, and working with Robbie was so nice."[47] *"Yigdal"*, the closing song from the service, appears on the 1989 Safam CD *The Greater Scheme of Things*[48] and also on their *Greatest Hits Volume IV*.[49]

There have been several other key commissions for Solomon. Joshua Jacobson said "I commissioned him to write a setting of 'Psalm 130 (*Mi Ma'amakim*)' for choir and orchestra, which I did with Zamir and also with my chorus at Northeastern University for a Holocaust memorial program."[50] This piece was originally done in 1986 and revised in 1992. Solomon says of the work, "It's in 5/4 for the opening section which I chose probably for the simple reason that the words "*Mi Ma'amakim*" have five syllables. It is very rhythmic with voices entering and intertwining. It's a longish composition for me with several sections of different character. I bring the theme back

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[44] Cantor Robbie Solomon, e-mail to author, 8 January 2006

[45] Cantor Linda Shivers, phone interview with author, 9 January 2006.

[46] Cantor Robbie Solomon, *Zimrat Shalom* (A Song of Peace), self-published 1989.

[47] Shivers.

[48] Safam, *The Greater Scheme of Things*, Newton Centre, MA: SFM – 007CD.

[49] Safam, *Greatest Hits Volume IV*, Newton Centre, MA: Safam 02459, CD.

at the end with some good effect, I think, using the build up of voices to express the words---from out of the depths."[51]

In 1998, Cantor Donn Rosenzweig asked Solomon to write a duet for him and his son to sing at the son's Bar Mitzvah. The song is the final track on Safam's 1999 CD *In Spite of It All*.[52]

> His parashah was Shoftim, so we went with the text "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof..." Robbie came up with a great melody and a text that drew on Psalms as well, with a father-son exchange involved. We tweaked the lyric somewhat to make it a little more pointed and went with it. Daniel and I sang it at the bar mitzvah, and again on the high holy days as an anthem and again when Safam played a concert at our temple. We helped create a good song and had a lot of pleasure performing it.[53]

In 2001, Cantor Fredda Mendelson commissioned Solomon to write two pieces for use at Larchmont Temple in Larchmont, NY. "Build Me a Holy Place" was written for the dedication of their new sanctuary. It is a ten-page composition for cantor, choir, keyboard, and flute with a refrain near the end for the congregation to join in the piece. He used three biblical texts in the piece – Exodus 25: 8, Psalm 118: 24, and Deuteronomy 51:9. He also wrote a song for the Bar Mitzvah of Rabbi Jeff Sirkman's son Gabriel in September 2001. Rabbi Sirkman is longtime fan of Safam and Solomon's music, so it was particular joy to have Cantor Mendelson offer the song "Forever Blessed" as her musical blessing for his son. When asked if the song was right for the day, Rabbi Sirkman wrote, " It not [only] 'worked', but evoked a feeling of sweetness I can still feel if I close my eyes"[54]

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[50] Dr. Joshua Jacobson, phone interview with author, 10 January 2006.

[51] Cantor Robbie Solomon, e-mail to author, 17 January 2006.

[52] Safam, *In Spite of it All*, Newton Centre, MA: SFM011, CD.

[53] Cantor Donn Rosenzweig, e-mail to author, 13 December 2005.

[54] Rabbi Jeff Sirkman, e-mail to author, 19 January 2006.

The Orphan Queen

Solomon put his talents to use in a new area in 1997 with the debut of his full-length Purim cantata *The Orphan Queen*. As defined by music scholar Dr. Robert Strassburg, Solomon created a pulpit opera. He defines it as "a dramatic work created by a writer and/or composer that stirringly brings to life the essential message contained in the *parsha* of the week or special occasions, such as ... festivals, and of course, the High Holy Days."[55] Strassburg believes the pulpit opera is a powerful and important way to either introduce a story or expand the audience's way of experiencing "great Jewish narratives."[56]

Solomon did this on an even larger scale than envisioned by Strassburg. It was a project that was decades in the making.

> I had actually begun a Purim cantata with a friend, Alex Moore, in Israel. Then in '74, I was working as the music teacher at Temple Israel in Boston and wrote a number of songs for their teen choir to sing at Purim in a kind of musical spiel. Members of that choir sang on Safam's first album, *Dreams of Safam*[57], on the song "Purim Parade", a song from the play. The play kicked around and was performed over the years at the synagogues where I worked, with me writing new songs here and there and eliminating others--it was called "Esther".[58]

"Esther's Prayer", another song that ultimately ended up in the show, appears on the 1980 Safam album *Sons of Safam*.[59] Solomon continues the story of the creation of the show.

> Then in 1997, with the backing of Harry Indursky (z'l) a wealthy businessman from Newton, Mass, it was expanded several-fold to a full length musical, and later renamed *The Orphan Queen*. More revisions were made for the 2004 production. Nothing remains from the Israeli collaboration, and very few songs of the original versions survived unchanged, but the musical ideas stemmed from some of those initial writings.

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[55] Dr. Robert Strassburg, "Pulpit Operas to Enrich the Sabbath," *CCAR Journal* (Winter 2002): 47.

[56] Ibid, 46.

[57] Safam, *Dreams of Safam*, Newport Centre, MA: CD-2539, 1976, CD.

[58] Cantor Robbie Solomon, e-mail to author, 25 December 2005.

[59] Safam, *Sons of Safam*, Newton Centre, MA: SF-40979, 1980, CD.

> At the time (in Israel) we were very much into the jazz of a big band leader named Don Ellis, who was experimenting with crazy rhythmic patterns like 17/8's. (Also Dave Brubeck and Leonard Bernstein) The 7/4 pattern of "Purim Parade" is a direct result of that. By the way, I found over the years, that children's choirs never had any trouble negotiating that beat; especially if you didn't tell them that it was in any way unusual.[60]

Solomon made the piece into his own musical Midrash. While the biblical version has Vashti banned and never heard from again, Solomon brings her back in the second act and give the show two strong female characters. "I think that really says something about how women use cleverness, intelligence, and whatever powers they have," says Solomon.[61] He gave each of the characters their own style of music to help represent who they are, such as Vashti doing a blues-style song and Esther singing soft ballads.

The original production played to over 2000 people in 1997 at Temple Ohabei Shalom in Brookline, MA. It ran for four weeks in 1999 at the Jewish Theatre of New England. The revised show was presented in 2004, again at Temple Ohabei Shalom. There have also been productions in Portland, OR and Chicago. Other possible future productions include The National Jewish Theatre Festival in San Francisco and a Christian theatre group in Pennsylvania. If the last group is able to present it, that would fulfill one of the requests of the show's benefactor, Mr. Indursky. He really wanted to the show to be accessible to both Jews and non-Jews.

Much of the music is able to be performed outside of the show as well. In 2004, Joshua Jacobson of Zamir Chorale of Boston put together a program on the topic of Jews in Musical Theatre and he didn't hesitate to include numbers from *The Orphan Queen.* 'It's a wonderful piece, and I remember going to see a production of it when he first put it

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[60] Solomon, 25 December 2005.

on and being so impressed with the quality of it, the libretto, the music and the production as well."[62] Jacobson arranged and presented three songs from the show – "Everybody Loves A Party (1 and 2)" and "Purim Parade". The timing of that concert was perfect for Solomon. "It was prior to our latest production at Ohabei Shalom, so I used his concert as a promotion."[63]

Other songs from the show have had a life outside of it. Rosalie Gerut played Esther in the 1997 production and is the voice of Esther on the CD recording of the show from that same year.[64] When she performed her own show in 1998, she included her big solo from the show, "Esther's Prayer". A review said her rendition of the song "shared her gifts as actress able to dramatize the bravery of the song's hero."[65] In a May 2005 concert, Cantor Ida Rae Cahana had the opportunity to sing with Cantor Solomon. "I had never performed in concert with Robbie before and was delighted to have this opportunity to share with such a gifted singer and composer. We sang a duet, "What was I to do?" from his musical theater work, *The Orphan Queen*, a beautiful and wonderful piece for Purim or anytime."[66]

Cantor Solomon's music encompasses so many different styles and areas. There were so many more songs that could have been discussed in details from his musical library. But suffice it to say, virtually no matter what life-cycle event, what current event or just life event, Cantor Robbie Solomon likely has a song that will express what you are

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[61] Michael Gelbwasser, "The Sound of Esther," *The Jewish Advocate* (Boston), 27 March 1997, 25.
[62] Joshua Jacobson, phone interview with author, 10 January 2006.
[63] Cantor Robbie Solomon, e-mail to author, 17 January 2006.
[64] Cantor Robbie Solomon, *The Orphan Queen*, Original Concept Recording, Sharon, MA: Orphan Queen Productions, 1997, CD.
[65] Jules Becker, "Local vocalist sings her way into hearts of Natick audience," *The Jewish Advocate* (Boston), 21 May 1998, 15.

thinking and feeling at that time. He is able to do this because of the breadth of his musical knowledge, which we will discuss in depth in Chapter 3.

[66] Cantor Ida Rae Cahana, e-mail to author, 29 November 2005.

CHAPTER 3

He's somebody who's out there a doing a lot of creative stuff that's going to be embraced by a certain percentage. It's not going to be a Debbie Friedman because it's not folky enough, but it's more interesting than a lot of the folk music that's out there.[1] (Rabbi Howard Jaffe, Temple Isaiah, Lexington, MA)

The music of Robbie Solomon is not easy to categorize and that's his goal. He wants his music to fit the text. "The music is a slave to the words,"[2] says Solomon. The text gives an image and that tells him the direction the music should go. As mentioned in chapter 2, his early influences included Broadway show tunes and Mario Lanza. He remembers singing along with Lanza to pieces from *Carmen* and *Rigoletto*. When he was studying classical music, he was inspired also by twentieth century Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (1881–1953).[3] In *Peter and the Wolf*, Prokofiev uses different melodies to describe the characters and inserts key changes, depending on the character's activities. This is a style that Solomon has incorporated into a number of his pieces, including "I am My Beloved" and "May the Words/*Yihiyu*" from his *Zimrat Shalom* Friday night service. He has always loved folk music, and also the blues. He has put a blues-gospel feel into a number of songs, notably his choral arrangement of *Peace by Piece*. During the 1970's, he was a self-proclaimed Beatles maniac. The harmonies of his music for Safam and the eclectic mixture of styles on their albums followed the model set by the later Beatles albums.

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[1] Rabbi Howard Jaffe, phone interview with author, 19 January 2006.

[2] Cantor Robbie Solomon, interviewed by author, 22 November 2004.

As we saw, Solomon also counts Shlomo Carlebach as a huge influence on his music. In the mid 1960's, he was introduced to Carlebach music by the string players he was working with in Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village in the summer. Carlebach was doing something that no one before him had done. "I don't think anybody who has written music for guitars and liturgy was not taking it directly from him" said Solomon.[4] Before Carlebach, no one thought of using a rhythmic instrument for Jewish liturgical music. After he did, everyone started trying to do it. Carlebach was wonderful at writing melodies, but Solomon proceeds to take his own music to what he considers a more complex level. While Solomon wants to have a strong melody, he also wants to have a sophistication to his music with the harmonies and arrangements that he puts together. The discussion about his Purim cantata *The Orphan Queen* in chapter 2 shows how far his music has come, even adding jazz rhythms and chording into his work.

The combination of Solomon's classical music training, his knowledge of traditional Jewish motifs, and his grasp of pop music styles have given him the opportunity to put music into so many areas. Let's examine in depth one liturgical piece that used all of his expertise in those areas.

HASHKIVENU

Grant, Lord our God, that we lie down in peace, and that we rise again, O our King, to life.
Spread over us thy shelter of peace, and direct us with good counsel of thy own.
Save us for thy name's sake;
shield us and remove from us every enemy and pestilence, sword and famine and grief; remove the adversary from before us and from behind us; shelter us in the shadow of thy wings;
for thou are our protecting and saving God;
thou art indeed a gracious and merciful God and King.

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[3] The Prokofiev Page, www.prokofiev.org, accessed 15 January 2006.

[4] Cantor Robbie Solomon, interviewed by author, 9 January 2006.

Guard thou our going out and our coming in, for life and peace, henceforth and forever.[5]

Solomon wrote his setting of *Hashkivenu* in 1988. It was composed as part of a *Ma'ariv* service, which he wrote for the Cantors Assembly convention that year. It was written in memory of his mother, Shirley Solomon, who died of ALS in 1986. The *Hashkivenu* prayer is part of every evening service, coming after *Mi Chamocha* and before the *Amidah*. It "calls on God to protect us while we sleep. Its normal eulogy (chatimah) affirms that God *shomer 'amo yisra'el*, 'keeps his people Israel'. On Friday the concluding line is changed to *poreis sukkat shalom 'aleinu*. God 'stretches a tabernacle of peace over us'."[6] The prayer is given in the Babylonian Talmud *B'rachot* 4b and 9b. The wording varies in different rituals. The Palestinian Talmud version with the *pores succoth shalom alenu ve'al amo yisrael ve'al Yerushalayim* (PT. 4) which has been retained for Shabbat and the holidays.[7]

The history of this blessing is very interesting. While many prayers and blessings deal with issues that are not always concrete, this one had and continues to have immediate significance.

> In Babylonia, the center of Jewish life during the Talmudic periods, the nights were especially frightening. Sparsely populated areas and rural roads were dangerous. Criminals roamed and violence was prevalent. "Remove the adversary from before us and from behind us."..."Guard our going forth and our coming in" needs no elaboration. It meant simply that. (author's note - I would surmise that many urban-dwelling people today, who know nothing about the blessing of *Hashkivenu* give expression to similarly worded prayers.)
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> The concluding words of the blessing are changed on the Sabbath and on the festivals to suggest that on these holy days we require less protection against

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[5] Philip Birnbaum, *Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem*, (New York, Hebrew Publishing Company, 2002), 261 – 264.

[6] Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 72.

[7] A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development*, (New York, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1932; reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1995), 120.

> harmful elements. On these days, the people did not work in the unprotected fields, but spent the day in the relative safety of their own homes and neighborhoods. "The canopy of peace" was characteristic of the Sabbath in the physical as well as spiritual sense.
>
> One verse in the blessing, "Remove the adversary from before us and from behind us," may, however, have a meaning that goes beyond the sense of imminent physical danger. The word we translate as "adversary" is rendered in the Hebrew text by the word *satan.* In the Hebraic idiom, this word does not mean a "Satan" who fights against God. Judaism recognizes no independent spiritual power other than God. "Satan" refers to the evil impulses within man that prevent him from following his good inclinations and thus lead him astray. The verse might therefore also be translated as "Remove every evil impulse from before us and from behind us."[8]

When Cantor Solomon wrote this service, he based much of it on nusach. However, he chose not to do that for this piece. He purposely omitted the chatimah, so that "the cantor can add the chatimah in whatever nusach is appropriate for the service. I wrote it as a lullaby, (with a little nod to Brahms at the beginning) for that's what the prayer is in my mind. Lullabies often speak of the dreaded evils that we wish to be protected from."[9] Solomon also mentioned that he was asked to revisit the piece, so they could use it at the 2000 Cantors Assembly convention. This time, in addition to keyboard, he had marimba and alto saxophone accompanying him.

Analysis of the piece

The piece has three distinct musical sections, noted as 1, 2-a, 2-b, and 3. (See Appendix 1 for the sheet music with the chording and an analysis chart.) It begins in the key of B flat. There is a definite melody pattern at the beginning, two different styles in the middle and the return of the melody for the ending. Uniquely, it opens on a III chord, with the tonic (the I chord) coming on measure two. There is a six bar intro, and then the melody has a six bar phrase and then a five bar phrase for section A. At letter B, there is

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[8] Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Pray As A Jew,* (New York, Basic Books, 1980), 163-164.

a repeat of the six bar phrase and then an elongated nine-bar phrase. At section C, there is a color change in the music because the feeling in the text changes here - it speaks of the things we need protection from such as enemy, pestilence, famine and grief. The key modulates to B flat minor, the parallel minor. The style of the piece also begins to change here. He shifts from the moving accompaniment to a very static one. There is one chord in the left hand on beat one and then one chord in the right hand on beat two with both being held for beat three. Midway through, he also introduces a low pedal tone that then continues through sections D and E. Section D stays in B flat minor and has some quick tempo changes - going from a 9/8 measure, a 6/8 measure and then three more 9/8 measures before returning to our original 3/4 and a four bar interlude of the original melody line and key. But he doesn't take us back yet. Section E has the voice line with a motif and the piano line repeating it. It is almost a brief recitative section, the one time that type of vocal style is used. The accompaniment is holding a chord, so the cantor might be tempted to do a bit more with it. But the keyboard mimics exactly what the voice has just done, so this is not a place for "chazzanus". With that, we are at section F and the return to our original melody pattern of the six bar plus five bar phrase. That leads us into the final section, G, where the melody line builds to an elongated final cadence. He even puts in a V/vi chord in bar 79. Then we have a minor iii to vi to the major V, which takes us finally to the I chord for the last three bars.

Many of his pieces have a very wide range for the vocal line. He is a high tenor, so he doesn't hesitate to put in notes as high as B flat nearly two octaves above middle C. But he did not do that in this work. The highest note of the piece is a high F and it is used

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[9] Cantor Robbie Solomon, e-mail to author, June 2, 2005.

in very specific places. The first appearance is in bar 28 where the text is *hoshieinu,* meaning "to save us". The next time the F appears, it is being used twice in the same phrase (bars 57 and 58). Both on *ki eil* and on *chanun*, he uses it to emphasize the fact that "God is a gracious and merciful ruler". The final use is in bar 81 on the word *mei-a-tah* meaning "from you" (God). Each of these are meant to take the listener to a higher place when thinking about what God is (or could be) in his or her life.

Solomon did not write the piece with very fancy cadences. He uses a half cadence in the middle of the melody pattern and then an authentic cadence at the end of it, which comes at the end of section B and the end of the piece. He uses a full authentic cadence to end section E, and gives us a slightly deceptive sense that the piece is over. But instead he returns again to the melodic pattern for a balanced finish.

The dynamics called for in this piece make it challenging to sing, but very interesting for the listener. He gives no instruction at the beginning, only calls for "sweetly" when the vocal line actually begins at Section A. But from then on, he is very specific about how loud the music should or shouldn't be. At the beginning of Section B, he is asking for *forte* when the text says "spread over us thy shelter", but he calls for a decrescendo down to *mezzo-forte* for *sh'lomecha,* "your peace". We stay at *mf* for the rest of Section B, except for the High F in bar 28, where he realistically calls for *forte*, since that high note is going to come out louder anyway. Then the volume drops all the way to *piano* at the start of Section C. This is not what happens in many settings of this text. This section is where the text is listing out those things we hope to be protected from, such as enemy, pestilence and famine. The classic A.W. Binder recitative[10] of this text

[10] A.W. Binder, "*Hashkivenu*", Undated manuscript.

has the vocal line almost at a screaming point here, but not the Solomon setting. There is a color change in the music, but the vocal line becomes quiet and pleading here; no screaming at God. There can be a sense of trembling when one is asking God for this protection, and that is the feeling he is looking for here. Section D moves into the most dramatic part of the piece and the volume goes back up. He states *v'ha-seir satan milfanecha*, "remove the adversary from before us", and then repeats that pivotal line again at *forte* for emphasis. After the *fermata*, the dynamic pulls down to *mf* for the text meaning "and from behind us". That makes sense because what's behind us can never be quite as frightening as what still lays before us. Section E has the keyboard doing a huge arpeggio as *mezzo-piano*, but the vocal part and the echo of it in the keyboard should be *mf*. When the high notes come in at bar 57 and 58, the volume again goes up to *forte*. But then there is a two bar decrescendo all the way down to *piano* for the musical segue to Section F and the return of the original melody pattern. When the vocal line begins again, it is at *mf* and remains there throughout all of Section F and into Section G, our finale. In bar 78, just after the text has said *l'chayim* "for life", beat two has the chord to be *piano*, but then immediately back to *mf* for "and peace". That one chord at *piano* can be very effective to make a break in the thought between life and peace. I think of it as catching one's breath before asking God for that most precious gift, the gift of peace. The text finishes at *mf* for *mei-a-tah v'ad olam* "henceforth and forever". When the text is finished, the voice and keyboard decrescendo to *mp* for the ending. Being this exact in the dynamics is very challenging for a singer, but that precision will take the music and the listener to the place this composer wants them to reach when they hear it.

Rather than limit the usage of his music to either a daily service or Shabbat, Cantor Solomon chose to set the text that is consistent for all services and end it prior to the Chatimah. As he said, then the cantor can finish the piece with the appropriate nusach. For Shabbat, there is a bit more than the chatimah to cover, but for daily, only the chatimah is left. I decided to investigate to see what choices other composers made for this text.

Nusach-based (traditional) composers/Unaccompanied settings

Cantor Solomon's setting is written with a piano accompaniment because it was originally intended for a daily service, when instrumentation is accepted by *halakhic* Jews. He serves a Reform congregation, where he uses all kinds of instruments on Shabbat. His setting could work without any accompanying instrument, but that isn't how it is meant to be. Composers who write for traditional synagogues do not plan their pieces for anything except the solo voice of the cantor and the humming of the congregation. Several of the best known have set "*Hashkivenu*".

In the Pinchas Spiro *Complete Weekday Service,* musical *siddur* for daily services,[11] there is an optional tune for congregational singing of most of the text. It finishes with *v'rachum atah* and has the *hazzan* finish the text as a solo.

Adolph Katchko has three volumes of written *chazzanut*, based on nusach, all of which include *Ma'ariv*. In Volume one for Shabbat,[12] he only set from the spot where the

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[11] Pinchas Spiro, *Complete Weekday Service*, (New York: Cantors Assembly, 1980, Third printing 1998) 176 – 177.

[12] Cantor Adolph Katchko, *A Thesaurus of Cantorial Liturgy, Volume One*, (New York: Sacred Music Press, 1952, Reprint 1986), 9.

cantor comes in at *ushmor tseteinu* through the chatimah. This would fit easily with Cantor Solomon's setting, if one wanted to finish out the text. This setting gives the move into the new mode as well. In Volume two,[13] he set the full text of the prayer. It is filled with *melismas* and has a huge vocal range from middle C to a high B flat nearly two octaves above it. He has the high "screaming" notes on *oyev, dever, v'cherev, v'ra'av* the same way that Binder does, so that seemed to be a common way to handle that text. He actually ends that recitative at *v'rachum atah* and then has the rest of it as a second piece, although it could easily be sung as one complete piece. It is a very dramatic piece of music, and in no way resembles a lullaby. It is a desperate cry for protection. The setting in the third volume for the High Holidays[14] starts at *ushmor tseteinu* through the chatimah, so Cantor Solomon's setting could even be incorporated into one of those evening services.

Hazzan Israel Alter is another good resource for nusach-based settings of texts. In his Sabbath service, he set the full text of *Hashkivenu.*[15] It is not the dramatic recitative that Katchko set, but not as quiet as a lullaby. His choice for the *oyev, dever, v'cherev, v'ra'av* section is to have the voice doing full octave runs from low to high, each one moving up the scale to add to the dramatic intensity. He does not send the voice into the stratosphere, instead only having the voice go to an F sharp. There is a *fermata* at *v'ad olam*, so one could pick up just the ending of the text, rather than sing the full piece. For

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[13] Cantor Adolph Katchko, *A Thesaurus of Cantorial Liturgy, Volume Two*, (New York: Sacred Music Press, 1952, Reprint 1986), 18 - 21.

[14] Cantor Adolph Katchko, *A Thesaurus of Cantorial Liturgy, Volume Three*, (New York: Sacred Music Press, 1952, Reprint 1986), 25 - 26.

[15] Hazzan Israel Alter, *The Sabbath Service*, (New York: Cantors Assembly, 1968, Fifth Printing 1995) 16-17.

his setting of the text in the High Holiday service,[16] he does add in a lot of *melismas* and returns to the high "screaming" style for the *oyev* section. Again, he offers the ending part as a stand-alone section, if that is what the hazzan prefers. For his Festival service,[17] he set only the ending section, not the whole text. Neither composer chose to include any kind of melody line for the congregation to join in with the hazzan. This is clearly a cantorial moment in the service, at least according to Katchko and Alter.

Mid-20th Century Composers/Accompanied Settings

I mentioned the classic Binder recitative setting, but there are many others that are very well known. Binder also set the text to a Sephardic melody for his 1930 *Kabbalat Shabbat* service for four-part choir with cantorial solos in the middle and for the chatimah.[18] Interestingly, even though the full service was for Shabbat, he gave the text for both the daily and Shabbat, and has a note that the piece could begin or end at the *ushmor tseteinu* section. He wanted to be sure his music could be used in many ways. That basic tune survived to become a congregational tune in *Gates of Song* in 1987.[19] As part of his *Sabbath Eve Liturgy* service in 1932, Heinrich Schalit set it as an accompanied cantorial recitative.[20] He set the entire text and, because it was set specifically for Shabbat, it includes the chatimah. In contrast to the Solomon setting, there is sparse accompaniment with many completely a cappella measures. In the *oyev section*, he chooses to have the voice move up a diatonic scale with the peak note being on *v'haseir*.

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[16] Hazzan Israel Alter, *The High Holy Day Service*, (New York: Cantors Assembly, 1971) 8 – 10.
[17] Hazzan Israel Alter, *The Three Festivals*, (New York: Cantors Assembly, 1971, Third Printing, 2001) 8.
[18] A.W. Binder, *"Hashkivenu"*, *Kabbalat Shabbat* (New York, Transcontinental Music Publications, 1930), 25 – 29.
[19] A.W. Binder, arranger, *"Hashkivenu"*, *Gates of Song*, (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 1987) No. 42.
[20] Heinrich Schalit, *Sabbath Eve Liturgy*, (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 1952), 56–59.

The cantor finishes at *mei-a-tah v'ad olam,* and then at *ufros*, the tenors and basses take over from the cantor and finish out the piece. The setting could therefore be used on a weekday without the choral ending.

Max Helfman set the prayer as part of his *Shabbat Kodesh* service in 1942.[21] This is one of the most famous and impressive settings, I believe. It is set for SATB choir with optional solos for a cantor, if there is one, but clearly a cantor is not necessary for the use of this setting. It opens with a slow, lullaby-like solo part that is listed as being for an alto solo or the cantor, who is assumed to be a baritone. The text goes through *l'ma'an sh'mecha*, and that section can stand on its own. But then the exciting part begins with the choir's entrance at measure 25. The baritones begin with *v'hagein* and the energy builds as the text moves throughout the four parts. There is a short solo recitative line, which says cantor or tenor solo, to end that section. The choir's entrance at *uvtzeil* is marked *pianissimo* and stays at that dynamic for that whole section. But at bar 76, the baritones come in at *forte* and the piece hits what seems like the peak moment, but it isn't over yet. Bar 80 has a brief return to the opening soft solo motif for six bars. Then the final text *mei-a-tah v'ad olam* goes on for the final two pages, but the dynamics go in the opposite direction from what one would expect. The cantor line enters at *forte* and then the piece ends at *pianissimo* for the solo and even more softly for the choir. The

[21] Max Helfman, *Shabbat Kodesh*, (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 1972), 27 – 36.

text painting says first insist on forever, and then finally take the request to a whisper. It is a haunting and incredibly memorable setting of this text.

Contemporary composers

The contemporary composers have also set this text, but not in the same way as the earlier ones. In his *Friday Night Live Songbook*,[22] Craig Taubman set only part of the text for cantor, choir and congregation, with a very simple melody line that repeats over and over. He chose to skip the "scary" parts entirely and just stick with the reassuring text about God watching over us as we sleep. The "scary" section is the part of the text where we are told what we have to be afraid of, such as the phrase "every enemy and pestilence, sword and famine and grief".[23] There are two settings done by Kol B'Seder (Cantor Jeff Klepper and Rabbi Dan Freelander) - *Ushmor*[24] and *Haporés Sukat Shalom*.[25] They also chose to set the comforting sections and ignore why we are asking to be comforted. The Reform movement's compilation music book *The Complete Shireinu* [26] includes the Klepper song *Haporés*. It also has a setting by the group Mah Tovu of the first part of the text, and then (in my mind, confusingly) goes into *Shema*, and then finishes with the English of the *Hashkivenu* text that began it.[27] *Manginot* is the series of music books, by the Reform Movement's Transcontinental Music Publications,

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[22] Craig Taubman, "*Hashkivenu*", *Friday Night Live Songbook*, (Sherman Oaks, CA: Sweet Louise Music, 1999) 35 – 39.

[23] Birnbaum, p. 262.

[24] Jeff Klepper & Dan Freelander, "*Ushmor*", *The Kol B'Seder Songbook*, (Owings Mills, MD: Tara Publications, 1996) 14.

[25] Jeff Klepper, "*Haporés Sukat Shalom*", *The Kol B'Seder Songbook* (Owings Mills, MD: Tara Publications, 1996) 62 – 63.

[26] Jeff Klepper, "*Haporés Sukat Shalom*", *The Complete Shireinu* (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2001) 280.

to use with children. The first volume has no songs that cover this text at all.[28] The second volume includes only one use of the text. It is a setting of "*Haporeis Sukat Shalom*" by Stacy Beyer, which the book lists as being suitable for second graders.[29] I interpret that information as saying that either the editors of those music books really don't think this is a text for children, or few contemporary composers are choosing to set this text at all. Transcontinental Music also has two volumes for Shabbat, and only volume two has a setting of *Hashkivenu* by Steve Dropkin.[30] But again, he has just the beginning and the end of the text. I know that many of these contemporary settings come from the camp environment and that may be why they avoid the more difficult parts of the text. Even though it is meant as a lullaby, maybe they only want to go to sleep thinking about the protection of God, not why we need protection.

Michael Isaacson has set the entire prayer. In two of his services, *Shir Ari*[31] and *Nishmat Chayim*,[32] he includes settings of the full text. The *Nishmat Chayim* setting is a chant-like setting with minimal accompaniment. It could probably even be done in a traditional setting a cappella, which I don't feel would work for Cantor Solomon's setting. The *Shir Ari* setting is more of a complete piece with the keyboard part playing an equally important role. He does not follow the model of soaring high notes for the *oyev*

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[27] Steve Brodsky & Josh Zweibeck, "*Hashkivenu*", *The Complete Shireinu* (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2001) 276.

[28] Stephen Richards, ed., *Manginot*, (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 1992).

[29] Stacy Beyer, "*Haporeis Sukat Shalom*" *Manginot Volume II*, (New York, Transcontinental Music Publications, 2004) 64.

[30] Steve Dropkin, "*Hashkivenu*", *Shabbat Anthology Volume II*, (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 2004) 58 – 61.

[31] Michael Isaacson, "*Hashkivenu*", *Shir Ari*, (New York, Transcontinental Music Publications, 1992) 26 – 28.

[32] Michael Isaacson, "*Hashkivenu*", *Nishmat Chayim*, (New York, Transcontinental Music Publications, 1984) 28 – 31.

section in either of these settings. He is quite prolific, so it is likely there are more settings by him of this text, but these are the two that I have in my files. I only found one setting by Ben Steinberg, but I suspect the same is true for him. The Steinberg setting is in his 1963 evening service *Pirchay Shir Kodesh* and is a recitative for the cantor.[33] When he gets to *oyev*, he changes keys and has high notes, but it is in a very rhythmic pattern. It is not in the form of a *melisma*. He also went all the way to the end, including the chatimah.

Cantor Solomon took on the challenge that many of his contemporaries choose not to do, by setting the entire text and interpreting it for his time. We may be blessed with not having to literally worry about famine. But his setting can remind us that there can be a famine of time, spirit, energy, or even love in our lives. There can be swords of gossip, of hatred and bigotry, even anti-Semitism. His is not a setting to be sung around a campfire, or even by a congregation. It does not have a true chorus, although there is a repetition of the opening motif. That is clearly more important for some of his peers, such as Beyer and Taubman. His piece is more reminiscent of the Alter or Binder recitatives. The setting is the main work of that entire *Ma'ariv* service. It is a musically intricate, thoughtful work that gives the prayer his new and unique vision of what we can ask for and expect from God in our time.

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[33] Ben Steinberg, *Pirchay Shir Kodesh*, (New York: Transcontinental Music Publications, 1963), 32 – 36.

CHAPTER 4

"His legacy will be the music that he's written. In the long run, that's what will last"[1] (Cantor Linda Shivers)

Cantor Robbie Solomon's many compositions have made a lasting impression on the Jewish world. His work as a composer gives him a chance for a more universal impact, his cantorate a more individual one. In the summer of 2005, he began as the first full-time cantor at Temple Isaiah in Lexington, MA, after having spent fourteen years as the cantor at Temple Ohabei Shalom in Brookline, MA. His day to day life as a cantor gives him the opportunity to know that he is making a difference. Two examples of that during his time in Brookline even made it into the local press. Because of their positive experience with him, a couple who met at Ohabei Shalom had Cantor Solomon and Rabbi Emily Lipof conduct their wedding ceremony. "They have created a special environment at the synagogue, one that is supportive of our spiritual, mental and emotional growth as Jews," said the bride Randi Donnis.[2] When Eve Silverman, a prominent Boston-area artist and Zionist, passed away, her obituary mentioned that she had been in Cantor Solomon's choir and that he was officiated at her funeral.[3] Solomon is now going to pass on his cantorial skills to the next generation: he has joined the adjunct faculty of Hebrew College's cantorial program.[4]

Social action and justice remain an important cause for Solomon. In 2003, he and the other members of Safam lent their support to a project called "Voices for Israel". It was a

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[1] Cantor Linda Shivers, phone interview with author, 9 January 2006.

[2] Robert Israel, "Finding Love and commitment at synagogue", *Jewish Advocate* (Boston), 2 June 1994, 1.

[3] "Eva 'Eve' Silverman of Brookline, renowned artist and Zionist," *Jewish Advocate* (Boston), 29 October – 4 November 2004, 43.

CD made to help raise money for victims of terrorism in Israel. But Solomon acknowledges that many of today's contemporary Jewish composers are not writing songs about the issues facing the American-Jewish community. He singles out Rabbi Joe Black, as one composer talking musically about the social issues. Several other people involved in Jewish music named Beth Schaefer as a performer who is trying to say something with her music. But overall Solomon complains, "The people who are in the popular venues are concentrating on the liturgy."[5] Solomon, too, cares about writing for liturgy, but he estimates that only about 40% of the music done by Safam was liturgical.

Solomon's legacy

"I like his songs. I do think he has been one of the leading cool fresh voices in Jewish music for the past God knows how many years, so *kol hakavod* to him."[6] (Craig Taubman, contemporary Jewish music composer)

Solomon and Safam have left their mark on contemporary Jewish music. Now that the twentieth century has ended and people are beginning to record its Jewish musical history, Safam is virtually always mentioned. In her 2003 book *Discovering Jewish Music*, Dr. Edelman devotes nearly six pages to Safam and their groundbreaking accomplishments. Others, too, point out Safam's significance in Jewish music history. When asked why such a strong folk movement arose in Jewish music, Cantor David Shneyer starts with Shlomo Carlebach; and then "points to the pioneering work of Debbie Friedman, Kol B'Seder and Safam, followed by the pop-rock sounds of Craig Taubman and Doug Cotler."[7] Rabbi Winston Weilheimer, a Jewish music program host on the

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[4] Jules Becker, "Director of cantor education in Newton singing its praises," *Jewish Advocate* (Boston) 23 September 2005. 18.

[5] Cantor Robbie Solomon, phone interview with the author, 9 January 2006.

[6] Craig Taubman, e-mail to the author, 9 January 2006.

[7] Rahel Musleah, "From Harp to Heavy Metal", *Hadassah Magazine*, February 1995, 34.

Internet, held a Safam marathon on his show in 2004. "The marathon was a tribute to their work and music, [as] they are [as] important to modern Jewish music as Shlomo Carlebach or Debbie Friedman."[8]

Solomon and his audience have grown up together. As the babyboomers reach retirement age, their children, Gen. – X, are beginning to exert power in America. This has certainly caused a shift in the songs that Solomon and Safam write and sing in their concerts. "We have been doing a lot of family oriented things (songs), talk about our kids, issues of growing older and wiser and stuff like that."[9] But Solomon and the men of Safam are grateful for the longevity of their work, although founder Dan Funk is not surprised, saying, "The point simply is that we write music, which is a reflection of Jewish cultural affairs."[10]

What musical challenge is still out there for Solomon to conquer? In his new position at Temple Isaiah, he has the opportunity to expose his congregation to new works, as they are ready to hear them. He noted that he has many talented musicians within the temple, whose talents he wants to use. He also has help even closer to him. "My son is a classical musician and introduces me to all this new music and that's so interesting to me. The idea of some more sophisticated stuff appeals to me." [11] As long as there are texts to set, and topics to be taught, there will be challenges for Cantor Solomon. But his place in American Jewish history is set, with the collection of music he

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[8] Rabbi Winston Weilheimer, e-mail to the author, 8 January 2006.

[9] Cantor Robbie Solomon, Phone interview with the author, 9 January 2006.

[10] Judith Klein, "The Jewish American Sound Hits Its Prime", *The Jewish Journal* (Salem, MA: 14 April 2000) 4.

[11] Solomon, 9 January 2006.

has written and given his audience the opportunity to hear, sing and enjoy, at the very least, if not be moved to action to create a better world.

Hashkiveinu

Cantor Robert Solomon

Bb

Piano

iii I IV V9 ii

A sweetly

6

Solo

Hash - ki - vei - nu A-do - nai e - lo - hei - nu l'

Pno.

a tempo

V I V6/4 IV IV9

11

Solo

sha - lom v' ha - a-mi - dei - nu mal - kei - nu l' cha -

Pno.

IV6/4 I V9 vi IV vii° ii IV

B

17

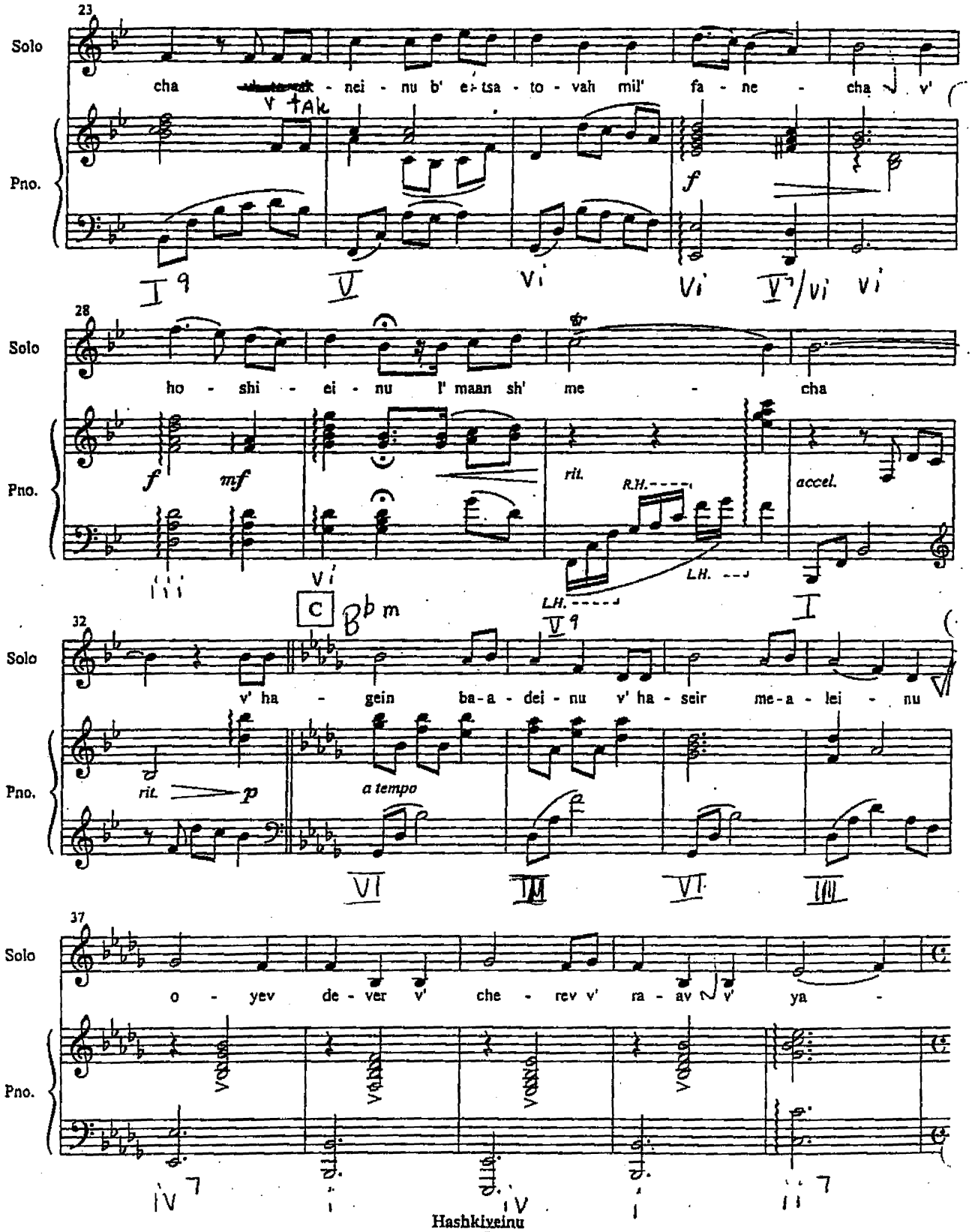
Solo

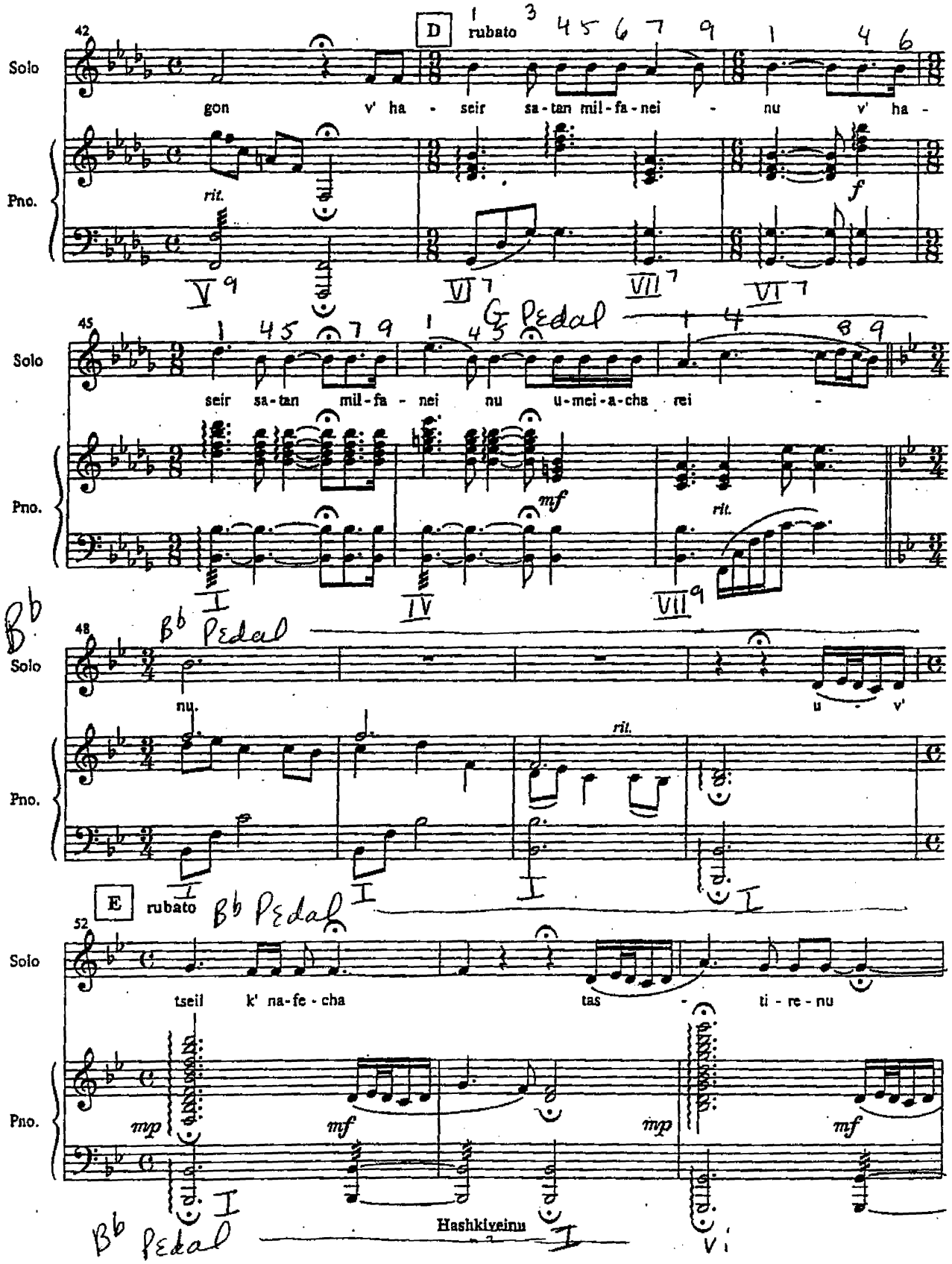
yim u-f' ros— a - lei - nu su - kat sh' lo - me -

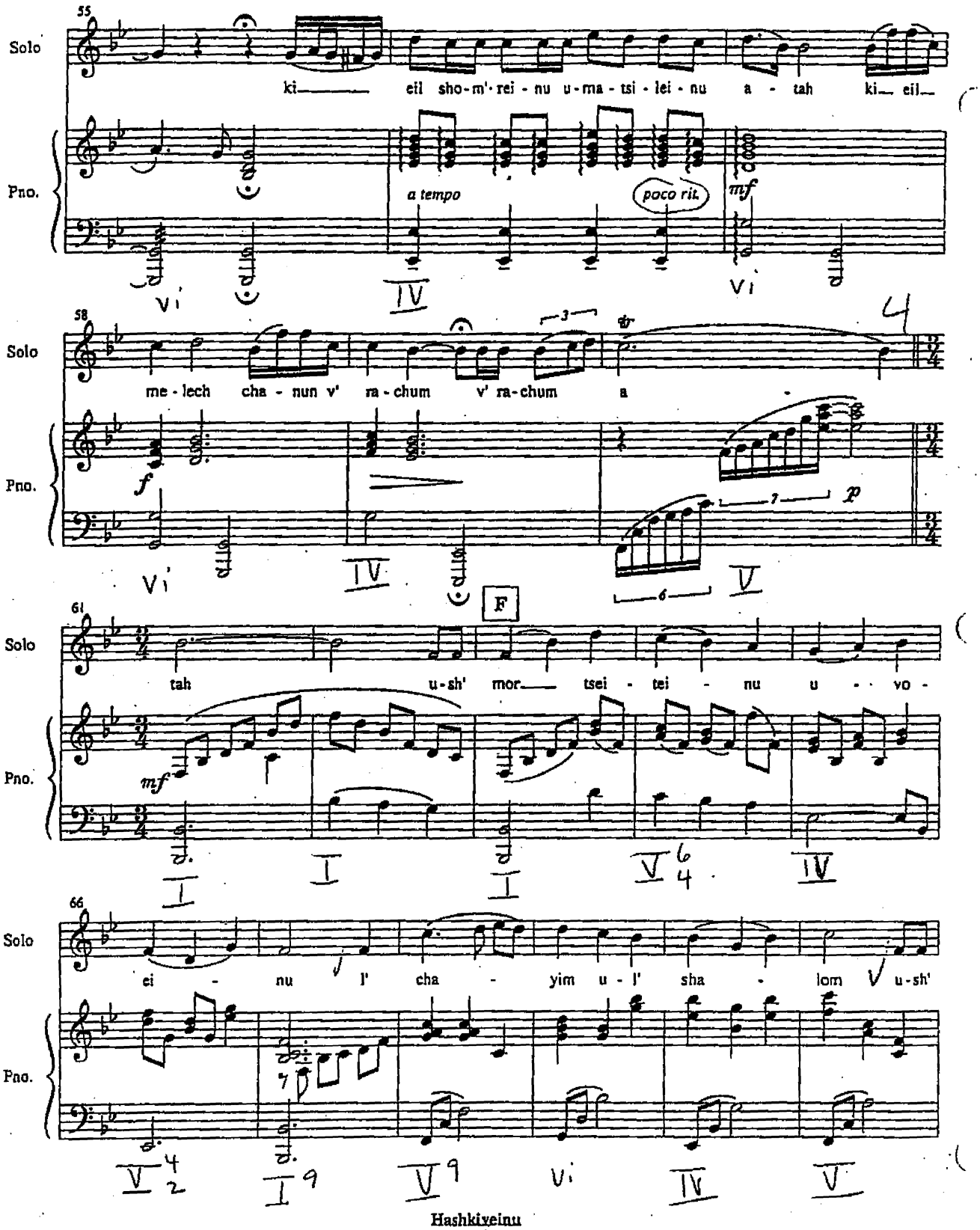
Pno.

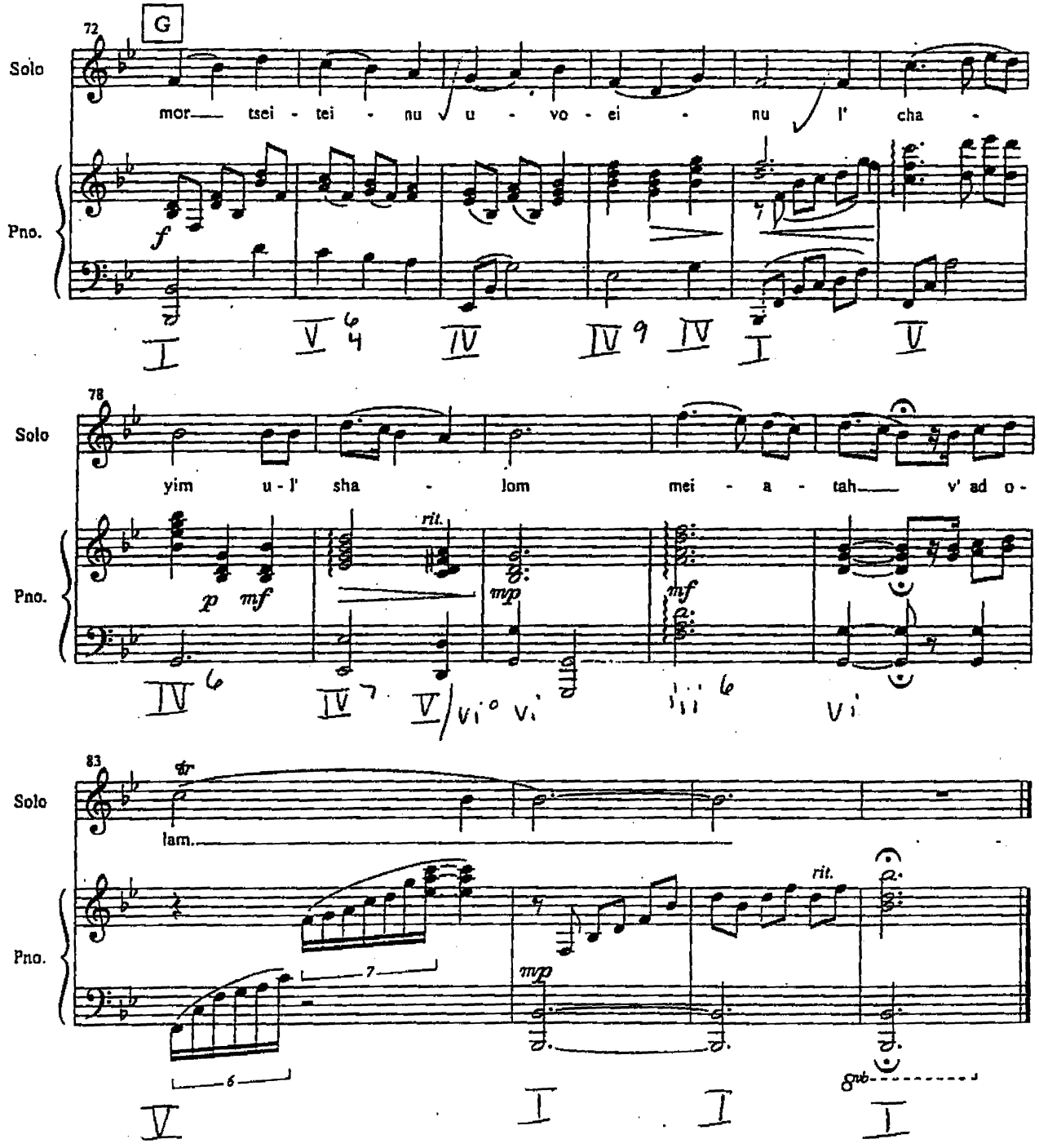
f mf

V I V6/4 IV IV9 IV6/4


23
Solo
cha - nei - nu b' e - tsa - to - vah mil' fa - ne - cha v'
Pno.
f
28
Solo
ho - shi - ei - nu l' maan sh' me - cha
Pno.
f
mf
rit.
R.H.
L.H.
accel.
C
B♭m
32
Solo
v' ha - gein ba-a - dei - nu v' ha - seir me-a - lei - nu
Pno.
rit.
p
a tempo
37
Solo
o - yev de - ver v' che - rev v' ra - av v' ya -
Pno.


42
D
rubato
Solo
gon v' ha - seir sa-tan mil-fa-nei - nu v' ha -
Pno.
rit.
f
45
Solo
seir sa-tan mil-fa - nei nu u-mei-a-cha rei -
Pno.
mf
rit.
48
Solo
nu.
u - v'
Pno.
rit.
E
rubato
52
Solo
tseil k' na-fe-cha tas - ti-re-nu
Pno.
mp
mf
mp
mf
Hashkiveinu


55
Solo
ki eil sho-m'-rei-nu u-ma-tsi-lei-nu a-tah ki eil
Pno.
a tempo
poco rit.
mf
58
Solo
me-lech cha-nun v' ra-chum v' ra-chum a
Pno.
f
p
61
Solo
F
tah u-sh' mor tsei-tei-nu u-vo-
Pno.
mf
66
Solo
ei-nu l' cha-yim u-l' sha-lom u-sh'
Pno.


G
72
Solo
mor— tsei - tei - nu u - vo - ei - nu l' cha -
Pno.
f
I V 6/4 IV IV 9 IV I V
78
Solo
yim u - l' sha - lom mei - a - tah— v' ad o -
Pno.
p mf
rit.
mp
mf
IV 6 IV 7 V/vi° vi ii 6 vi
83
Solo
tr
lam.
Pno.
rit.
mp
7
6
V I I I
8vb

HASHKIVENU - CANTOR ROBBIE SOLOMON

	1		
SECTIONS	INTRO	A	B
Measures	1 - 6	7 -17	18 - 32
Key	Bflat	Bflat	Bflat
Dynamics		(sweetly)	f - mf
Final Cadence	Half	Half	Authentic
Pedal tone	No	No	No
Musical Aspect	Moving Accompaniment	Moving Accomp.	Moving Accomp.

	2-a	
SECTIONS	C	D
Measures	33 – 42	43 - 51
Key	Bflat minor	Bflat minor
Dynamics	p	f - mf
Final Cadence	Half	
Pedal tones	Is introduced	Yes
Musical Aspect	Style changes to a strong downbeat in the left hand	Big chords, rhythm changes

	2-b	3	
SECTIONS	E	F	G
Measures	52-62	63-71	72-86
Key	Bflat	Bflat	Bflat
Dynamics	mp – mf – f – p	mf	f – mf – mp – mf
Final Cadence	full authentic	Half	authentic
Pedal tones	Yes	No	No
Musical Aspect	Voice & Keyboard echo/antiphonal Arpeggios under voice/ Harp – like style	Return to original theme	Elongated finale

ROBBIE SOLOMON SONGS RECORDED WITH SAFAM

With J.S. – Safam member Joel Sussman

Year is copyright date

SONG TITLE	W/J.S.	YEAR	SAFAM CD	GREATEST HITS
A Difference in this World		1995	After All These Years	III
Al Hanisim (Music/Original Lyrics)		1986	A Brighter Day	I
		1986	The Chanukah Collection	
Al Kol Eileh (translation only)		1983	Bittersweet	IV
Amar Rabi Elazar (music)		1984	Peace by Piece	I
Anim Z'mirot (music)		1984	Peace by Piece	IV
Bashert		1984	Peace by Piece	III
Birkat Hallel/Hallelu (music)	X	1980	Sons of Safam	IV
		1980	The Passover Collection	
Blessings (lyrics)	X	2003	The Chanukah Collection	
B'nai Safam	X	1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	
Bread of Affliction		1976	Dreams of Safam	
		1976	The Passover Collection	
B'tzeit Yisrael (music)		1980	Sons of Safam	IV
		1980	The Passover Collection	
Café Tel Aviv		1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	
Candles of the Menorah	X	1995	After All These Years	
		1995	The Chanukah Collection	
Cheder		1986	A Brighter Day	IV
Comfort Me Rachel(Lyrics)	X	1995	After All These Years	
Eight Little Candles		2002	The Chanukah Collection	
Eliyahu (music & English lyrics)		1992	On Track	
		1992	The Passover Collection	
Escape		1986	A Brighter Day	IV
Esther's Prayer		1980	Sons of Safam	
Etz Chayim (music)		1989	On Track	
Falasha Nevermore		1986	A Brighter Day	I
Family		1995	After All These Years	
Grandfather's Train	X	1993	On Track	III
Hamavdil (music)		1992	On Track	
Havdalah (music)		1986	A Brighter Day	
Holy Ground (music/English lyrics)		1999	In Spite of It All	
Home to Jerusalem		1986	A Brighter Day	II
In Spite of It All		1999	In Spite of It All	
Jonathan		1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	
Judah Macabee	X	1980	Sons of Safam	II
		1980	The Chanukah Collection	
Just Another Foreigner(Lyrics)	X	1983	Bittersweet	I
Kedoshim Medley(music/English lyrics)		1995	After All These Years	
L'cha Dodi		1983	Bittersweet	III
L'cha/Romemu (music)		1999	In Spite of It All	

SONG TITLE	W/J.S.	YEAR	SAFAM CD	GREATEST HITS
Leaving Mother Russia		1978	Encore	I
Lo Yisa Goy (music/English lyrics)		1978	Encore	
Mah Navu (music)		1984	Peace by Piece	I
Mah Nishtana (music)		1986	A Brighter Day	IV
		1986	The Passover Collection	
Mi Shebeirach (music/English lyrics)		1999	In Spite of It All	
Mizmor L'Todah (music)		1999	In Spite of It All	
Morning Light		1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	
My Beloved		1983	Bittersweet	II
No Easy Way		1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	III
		1989	The Passover Collection	
Peace by Piece		1984	Peace By Piece	II
Photo Album		1986	A Brighter Day	IV
Pitchu Li (music)		1980	Sons of Safam	II
		1980	The Passover Collection	
Reminiscence		1986	A Brighter Day	IV
Rivers of Babylon	X	1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	IV
Shachar 6:59 a.m. (music)		1984	Peace by Piece	
Shalom Rav(music)		1992	On Track	
Shavuah Tov (music)		1983	Bittersweet	
Shehecheyanu (music & English lyrics)		1995	After All These Years	III
		1995	The Chanukah Collection	
Song of Songs		1976	Encore	III
		1976	The Passover Collection	
Talmud Torah	X	1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	IV
The Greater Scheme of Things		1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	III
The Purim Parade		1976	Dreams of Safam	
Tsedek Tsedek Tirdof(music/Eng. lyrics)		1999	In Spite of It All	
V'ne-emar (music)		1978	Encore	II
V'shamru (with David Foreman)		1976	Dreams of Safam	IV
We are One		1984	Peace by Piece	IV
Where is the Light (with Rick Woods)		1993	On Track	
Wings of Love		1983	Bittersweet	
World of Our Fathers		1980	Sons of Safam	I
Yah Ribon Alam		1995	After All These Years	III
Yamit		1983	Bittersweet	IV
Yigdal (music)		1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	IV
Yiram Hayam (music)		1989	The Greater Scheme of Things	III
Yismechu (music)		1983	Bittersweet	II
Y'Voreich Et Beit Yisrael		1980	Sons of Safam	
		1980	The Passover Collection	

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