

Sacred Bridges

by Joshua Jacobson



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My first course in music history began with the study of Gregorian Chant. I learned how the grand tradition of polyphony had developed in the magnificent cathedrals of Europe. I deciphered the "witnesses" of the earliest art music tradition—neumatic and staff notation developed by the clerics in these cathedrals.

I never thought of questioning the curriculum, but the subtext seemed to be that there was no music worthy of study before Gregorian chant. The first chapter of Richard Crocker's *A History of Musical Style* (1966 edition) is titled, "Before the beginning: Gregorian Chant." The first chapter of Donald Grout's *A History of Western Music* (1960 edition) is titled, "The State of Music at the End of the Ancient World"; pages 1–19 are devoted to the Greek heritage, one half of page 20 is devoted to the Judaean heritage, and the explanation of church music begins on page 21.

In recent years scholars have provided us with a new perspective on the origins of church liturgy. The early Christians, as a breakaway sect of Jews, modeled many of their liturgical texts, ceremonies, and music after those of the Temple and synagogues in ancient Judea.

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1. **S** An-ctus, * Sán-ctus, Sán-ctus Dó-
minus Dé-us Sába-oth. Pléni sunt caéli et tér-ra
gló-ri-a tú-a. Hosánna in excél-sis. Bene-díctus
qui vé-nit in nó-mine Dómi-ni. Hosánna in
excél-sis.

"Sanctus" from the *Liber Usualis*

This is not an entirely new hypothesis. Three hundred years ago, Arthur Bedford, a Puritan, wrote,

I shall lay down this Hypothesis: that the Musick of the Temple did very much resemble that part of our Cathedral Service which we call the Chanting of the Psalms, esp. where Men and Boys sang the same Part without a Bass. . . . This was the method used by the Primitive Christians in the most Early Ages of the Gospel and this they borrowed from the Jews. . . .¹

Many of Bedford's peers felt the Church had to distance itself from its Jewish origins. But Bedford defended his position that the singing of plain-chant was appropriate for the English cathedral.

There are some, who take an Occasion to express their Dislike of our Method in Singing at the Cathedrals, because it resembles the Practice of the Jews, in the Time of the Old Law, and therefore they think it must be abolished at the Coming of Christ. This Argument hath been sufficiently confuted. . . . St. Paul exhorts the Ephesians to speak to themselves in psalms and hymns . . . and St. James (5:13) commands us that "any man is merry, he should sing psalms. . . ." This without Doubt, they sang . . . according to the Practice in Singing used among the Jews. . . . When the Apostles exhorted us to sing Psalms, they could have forewarned us at the same time of the Manner of their Singing, if it had been unlawful: but since in this they made no Alteration from the Jews, we have no Reason to make Alteration from them.²

Charles Burney did not hold plainchant in such high esteem. He wrote,

The value of Gregorian Chant corresponds to the low level of barbarians, i.e., the First Christians. They had no sense for the fine poetry of the Greeks, for they used for their melodies the prose-texts of Scripture.³

Burney attributed the base origins of Gregorian chant to the Jews.

That some part of the sacred music of the Apostles and their immediate successors, in Palestine and the adjacent countries, may have been such as was used by the Hebrews, particularly in chanting the psalms, is probable. . . .⁴

Similar attributions were made by, among others, François-Joseph Fétis, Hubert Parry, and Hugo Riemann.⁵ The first scholar to go beyond speculation, to offer proof of the derivation of Gregorian chant from ancient Jewish chant, was Peter Wagner.⁶ Wagner's methodology involved the collection and comparison of the most ancient chants from Jewish and Christian traditions. In this century, musicologists and liturgists, less fettered by dogma and prejudice, have brought us closer to a scientific understanding of the relationship between church and synagogue. Among those who have been working in this area are Israel Adler, Hanoch Avenary, Edward Birnbaum, Abraham Idelsohn, James W. McKinnon, Amnon Shiloah, John A. Smith, Peter Wagner, Egon Wellesz, and Eric Werner.⁷

A comparison of the liturgies of contemporary Judaism and Christianity would begin with the observation that there are common structural elements, including the public cantillation of a lesson from the scriptures, the chanting of Psalms and hymns, and congregational prayers of supplication and doxology.

Some sections of the two liturgies are virtually identical. Perhaps the most well known of the common liturgical texts is the fourth section of the ordinary of the mass: *Sanctus sanctus sanctus Dominus Deus sabaoth, pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua*. This is the Latin translation of the congregational response recited at least four times daily in the synagogue liturgy, *Kadosh kadosh kadosh, hashem tsevaot, melo chol ha'arets kevodo*, in English, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, all the earth is full of His glory." The source is Isaiah 6:3.

Several events on the Christian liturgical calendar are closely connected to their Jewish ancestors. Easter falls on the first Sunday after the spring full moon, so it will coincide with the Last Supper, which took place on Passover, which falls on the spring full moon. The scheduling of Christmas on the twenty-fifth night of December echoes the Jewish holiday of Chanukah, which begins on the twenty-fifth night of the lunar month of *Kislev*.

Several words in the church liturgy have been adopted directly from the synagogue. These Hebrew expressions entered the vernacular in transliteration, rather

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than translation. They include *amen* [so be it], *hallelujah* [praise the Lord], *hosanna* [save us, please], *Sabaoth* [hosts, or armies of angels], and *Selah* [a rock].⁸

The oldest stratum of music in synagogue and church is that which is associated with its oldest and most sacred texts—the canonized Bible. Since the words of the Bible were considered to have been spoken or inspired by God, they were zealously protected from change. According to some traditions, God not only spoke these words, God sang them. Hence, the well-known legend of Pope Gregory I receiving the melodies of the chants that bear his name directly from the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove.

Rabbi Judah Ben-Samuel “The Pious” (c. 1150–1217, Regensburg) wrote:

The Bible must be chanted according to the melodies that were revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. As it is written (Exodus 19:19), “God answered [Moses] with a voice.” “With a voice” means that Moses heard the melody directly from God, and Moses used that same melody to chant the Scripture for the Israelites.⁹

The chanting or “cantillation” of biblical texts does in fact sound rather exotic. In their zeal to protect this music from change, its practitioners through the ages succeeded in preserving the monophonic texture and much of the freedom of rhythm and the colorful modalities characteristic of the ancient Middle East.

Thanks to studies in comparative musicology conducted over the last hundred years, we can now point to the specific Jewish sources of numerous Catholic chants. Figure 1 shows the first two verses of Psalm 114 chanted in the Gregorian *tonus peregrinus*. Figure 2 shows those same verses chanted in a North African Jewish tradition.

The melodies are nearly identical. How do we explain this? Did a Jew go into a church and copy the music? Did a monk sneak into a synagogue and transcribe the Jewish Psalmody? Neither scenario is likely, especially when we consider that this same chant is sung in synagogues in such far-flung and isolated com-

For nearly two thousand years zealous religious authorities have attempted to prevent Jews and Christians from having any influence on each other's liturgical practices.

munities as Yemen and Poland. A more likely explanation is that both derive from a common ancient source—the liturgy of Jerusalem some two thousand years ago—the Psalms as they were sung by the Levites in the Temple, by the common Jew in the synagogue, by Jesus and his disciples, and by the first Christians.

Why has there been such a deafening silence about the Jewish origins of Gregorian chant? Perhaps the church fathers felt a need to forge an identity for the church that distanced itself from its Jewish roots. The nineteenth-century Austrian historian R. G. Kiesewetter wrote:

The Christians evinced an anxiety to separate themselves from the Jews, and their object was, in fact, more especially to be found in a peculiar art of song distinct from that of any other religion.¹⁰

In some writings there are overtones of anti-Semitism, as well. In the late eighteenth century, the respected music historian Johann Nikolaus Forkel wrote:

In short, even under immediate instruction by divinity (Christ) the culture of that nation (the Jews) remained so backward, that it is not to be counted among the number of cultured nations.¹¹

For nearly two thousand years zealous religious authorities have attempted to prevent Jews and Christians from having any influence on each other's liturgical practices. A sixteenth-century codification of Jewish law and practice (*The Shulchan Aruch*) states:

A cantor [in the synagogue] who sings melodies that the gentiles use in their worship should be prevented from doing so, and if he refuses to comply and persists in doing so, he is to be removed from his position.¹²



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On the other side of the coin, many Christian theologians found themselves embroiled in a battle to purge the church from Jewish influences. The fourth-century monk Diodorus of Tarsus (Turkey) complained that the Church was imitating Jewish songs, and his student, St. Chrysostom, warned against imitating Jewish practice.¹³

Of course, the very presence of these prohibitions is a sign that laws were needed to curb an existing practice. Jews and Christians were attracted to each other's music and were crossing the sacred bridge.

Jewish cantors and composers were fascinated by the music they managed to hear in the world beyond their ghetto walls. Sometime before 1622 the Italian Jewish composer Salamone Rossi wrote a setting of Psalm 137, *Al Naharot Bavel* [By the Waters of Babylon]. This music, which was sung in the synagogue of Mantua, Italy, on *Tisha B'Av*, a fast day that commemorates the destruction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, was composed completely in the style of the church lamentations of the same period. It bears no resemblance to the traditional synagogue chanting of Rossi's time. Furthermore, the opening melody of Rossi's

composition is modeled note-for-note on a church motet to the Latin version of that same text, composed by Rossi's friend, the chapel composer, Lodovico Viadana (Figures 3 and 4).

There are also instances of non-Jewish composers being attracted to traditional Jewish melodies. The eighteenth-century Venetian church composer, Benedetto Marcello, to add a touch of authenticity to his Psalm settings, based his themes on melodies he heard in the Synagogues of Venice. Like other great artists of his time, Marcello felt the need to base his creative work on that of the ancients. Although his contemporaries based their church music on Gregorian chant, Marcello attempted to go further back, to the roots of Psalm singing in ancient Jerusalem.

Marcello published his Psalm settings, titled *Estro poetico-armonico*, in 1724. Several of the arias are based on the Jewish melodies he had collected. To demonstrate the exalted lineage of these compositions, the composer included his transcription of the original chants, with the Hebrew text and music reading from right to left¹⁴ (Figures 5 and 6).

During the emancipation movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, some Rabbis attempted to "re-form" the Jewish service, to make it less oriental and more like the service of their Lutheran neighbors. In 1810 the German Rabbi Israel Jacobson established the first Reform Temple in Europe. He abolished the ancient modes of chanting Scripture along with the traditional prayer modes. In their place he introduced the singing of Protestant chorales with organ accompaniment, fitted with new texts in German or Hebrew. Figure 7 shows a page from Jacobson's hymnal. The Lutheran hymn, "Wenn ich, O Schöpfer," has been set with a Hebrew text, "Tsurim darkecha etbonan," and the music runs from right to left to accommodate the Hebrew text (Figure 7).

One of the most fascinating cases of bridge-crossing comes from eighteenth-century England. Meier Leon was born in London in 1755. As a youth, he displayed tremendous musical talents in Jewish and secular music. At the age of eleven he was appointed "zinger" [cantor's assistant] in the newly rebuilt Duke's Place

Figure 1. Psalm 114, Gregorian Chant

Figure 2. Psalm 114, Jewish synagogue chant

Figure 3. Rossi, *Al Naharot Bavel*

Figure 4. Viadana, *Super flumina Babylonis*

Whatever happened to Cantor Leon from London? Despite the popularity of his tune, the Jewish community in London must have continued to have misgivings about their operatic clergyman. In 1787, when the Jewish community in Kingston, Jamaica, wrote to London asking for a cantor, the British were only too happy to send them Meier Leon. Leon set sail and remained at his post in Jamaica until his death in 1800. We have no record of any music from his pen from that period; Jewish calypso and reggae would remain dormant for well over a hundred years.

By the late nineteenth century, contact between Jewish and Christian musicians became much more common. In 1881, Max Bruch composed an *Adagio* for cello and orchestra based on *Kol Nidre*, a Jewish liturgical melody he had learned from his friend, Cantor Abraham Jacob Lichtenstein. In 1914, Maurice Ravel wrote an art song titled *Kaddisch*, based on the synagogue doxology for the High Holy Days. The composer wrote of this experience:

I was attracted to the strange and haunting beauty of Jewish music. I

felt almost as though I had been brought into a new musical world when a few authentic Jewish melodies were brought to my notice. I was so bewitched by the mysterious color and exotic charm of these melodies that for weeks I could not get this music out of my mind. Then my imagination was set aflame.¹⁷

Modest Mussorgsky was also attracted to the Jewish liturgy. In 1866, through an open window, he overheard a devotional melody being sung by his Jewish neighbors.¹⁸ This tune, attributed to Rabbi Abraham Ha-Mal'akh (1741-81), would resurface a decade later as the main theme for Mussorgsky's oratorio, *Joshua* (1877). In fact, the composer was so fond of this Jewish melody he asked that it be inscribed on his tombstone (Figures 16 and 17).

These bridge crossings raise interesting but thorny questions. Can a gentile composer create Jewish music? Can a Jewish composer create music for the church? In 1971, Leonard Bernstein, a composer with deep Jewish roots, wrote a highly unorthodox *Mass* for the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Bernstein brought to the central liturgy of the Catholic faith the same "God-wrestling" one finds in his Jewish works, such as the *Jeremiah* and *Kaddish* symphonies and the *Chichester Psalms*. Furthermore, in at least one movement of this work, Bernstein made a conscious attempt to cross the sacred bridge. Appended to the Latin *Sanctus* is its Jewish equivalent, the Hebrew *Kedushah*.¹⁹

Judaism and Christianity have been cross-pollinating, off and on, for the past two millennia. Despite dogmatic restrictions, deep-seated prejudices, and enforced segregation, there has been a growing understanding of the religion of the "other." In recent years there seems to be a deeper respect for differences in culture and theology. This mutual appreciation is slowly being felt in the world of musical performance. Perhaps someday even Grout will catch up.

Notes

¹ Arthur Bedford, *Temple Musick, Or an Essay Concerning the Method of Singing the*

Figure 8. *The God of Abraham Praise* (Leon).

Figure 9. Leon, *Yigdal* (as sung in contemporary American synagogues)

Psalms of David in the Temple: Wherein the music of our cathedrals is vindicated as conformable not only to that of primitive Christianity, but also to the practice of the Church in all preceding (London: H. Mortlock, 1706), 61–2, cited in Eric Werner, “Musical Traditions and its Transmitters between Church and Synagogue,” *Yuval* 2 (1971), 171.

² Bedford, *Temple Musick*, 236.

³ Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, Volume 1 (London, 1776), 212, cited in Werner, “Musical Traditions,” 172.

⁴ Burney, *A General History of Music*, Volume 2, p. 41, cited in Werner, “Musical Traditions,” 173.

⁵ J. F. Fétis, *Histoire générale de la Musique*, vol. 4 (Paris: Didot, 1874), 8–12; Sir Hubert Parry, *Evolution of the Art of Music* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1893), 53; H. Riemann, *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte*, Vol. 1, Part 2 (Leipzig: Breitköpf & Härtel, 1923), 33, 56, 82, cited in Werner, “Musical Traditions,” 174–176.

⁶ Peter Wagner, *Einführung in die gregorianische Melodien*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Breitköpf & Härtel, 1911), 17.

⁷ For the most thorough treatment of this subject, see Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: The Interdependence of Liturgy and Music in Synagogue and Church during the First Millennium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), reprint edition New York: Da Capo Press, 1979.

⁸ Bible scholars speculate that “selah” may have been a signal for an instrumental interlude, which then was a signal for all the worshippers in the Temple to prostrate themselves. In later Hebrew, “selah” means “forever.”

⁹ Judah Ben-Samuel, *Sefer Ha-Hasidim*, ed. Jehudah Wistinetzki and J. Freimann (Frankfurt am Main: Wahrmann, 1924), 207, §817.

¹⁰ Eric Werner, “Musical Traditions,” 168.

¹¹ J. N. Forkel, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik* Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Schwickert, 1788), 90. Cited in Werner, “Musical Traditions,” 168.

¹² Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayyim*, §53:25 (see also the commentary in *Mishnah Berurah*).

¹³ Eric Werner, “The Conflict between Hellenism and Judaism in the Music of the Early Christian Church,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 20 (1947), 458.

¹⁴ Joshua Jacobson, “Choral Music for Chanukah,” *Choral Journal* 31:2 (1990), 22.

¹⁵ *Jewish Chronicle*, 1873, p. 642, cited in Abraham Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development* (New York: Holt,

Fug - gi fug - gi fug - gi da que - sto cie - lo Aspr' e

§ ritornello

du - ro spie - ra - to e gie - to. Tu ch'il tut - to i pri - gio - ni e

le - ghi. Ne per pian - to ti fran - gio pie - ghi. Fier - ti -

Figure 10. “The Dance of Mantua,” arranged by Giuseppino Del Biabo

Solo

Kawl - od ba - lei - vavv pe - ni - - maw ne - fesh Ye - hu - di

ho - mi - yaw, Ul - fa - sey - miz - rawch kaw - di - maw

a - yin le - Tsi - yon tso - fi - yaw. Od lo awv - daw tik - vavv sey - nu,

ha - tik - vav ha - no - shaw - naw, Law - shuv le - e - rets a -

vo - - sey - nu, law - ir baw - Daw - vid chaw - - naw.

Figure 15. *Hatikvah*

a - za - mer bi - she - vo - khin le - me al - - -

go - - - fis - khin de - va - kha - kal - - -

ta - pu - khin de - i - nun ka - di - shin

Figure 16. Rabbi Abraham Ha-Mal'akh, *Azamer Bishvachin*

Allegro marziale

Vel - en' - yem Ye - go - vy - Sok - ru - stchit' Iz - ra - il' dol - zeh

Han - an - ye - yef nye - tchest - i - vykh nye - pry - e - klon - nykh - ot - kro - vye - n'yu.

Figure 17. The main theme from Mussorgsky's *Joshua*.



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Rinehart and Winston, 1929), reprint ed.
New York: Dover, 1992, 220-221.

- ¹⁶ Originally, "Tikvateynu" (Our Hope).
¹⁷ A. Vinkovetzky, A. Kovner and S. Leichter
(eds.), *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*
(Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), Vol. 1,
p. v.
¹⁸ Vladimir Stasov, *Modest Musorgsky*
(Moscow, 1952), 210, cited in Boris
Schwartz, "Musorgsky's Interest in
Judaica," in Malcolm H. Brown (ed.),

Musorgsky: In memoriam (Ann Arbor:
UMI Research Series, 1982), 89.

- ¹⁹ The *Sanctus* is published by Boosey &
Hawkes as a separate choral octavo. For
an analysis of the Jewish elements in
Bernstein's *Mass*, see Jack Gottlieb, "A
Jewish Mass or a Catholic Mitzvah?"
Journal of Synagogue Music 3 (December
1971), 3-7.

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