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Musing about Jewish Music

by Joshua R. Jacobson

For the past few decades, teaching workshops on Jewish music at conventions of the American Choral Directors Association, I have noticed a growing interest in multiculturalism—albeit an interest fraught with complex motivations. The staple of the choral repertoire—settings by great composers of masses, requiems, passions, cantatas, anthems, and motets—has come under fire. Some Jews and Muslims have expressed concern about the effect on their children of constant exposure to Christian liturgy. Some African Americans and Asian Americans have questioned the exclusivity of music from the European traditions. As a result, many conductors today are seeking the "politically correct" path, attempting to be as inclusive as possible. Occasionally, the results are disastrous.

In some school systems conductors have been told to avoid liturgical music altogether. This misguided attempt at political correctness censors some of Western civilization's greatest works of art. Is singing Mozart's *Requiem* in a concert hall a theological experience or an aesthetic experience? What about going to a museum to see Raphael's *Madonna and Child*? Most actors leave their characters behind when they remove their costumes and make-up; isn't it the same for singers? Singing Christmas carols around a tree or singing the *St. John Passion* in church at an Easter service may be uncomfortable for those who do not belong to a particular community of faith. When I conduct Handel's *Messiah* in concert, whether in a church or an auditorium, I am aesthetically and spiritually involved, without compromising my belief systems as a traditional Jew.

Other school conductors take a less radical path—they attempt to balance their programming. The "December dilemma" is solved by adding some Chanukkah music to a Christmas concert. Another disaster! Some of the greatest music has been inspired by themes of the Christmas season. Chanukkah, by contrast, is a minor holiday. Music publishers, seeing a vacuum and smelling a market, have flooded us with a deluge of inane *dreidel* songs. The contrast of the highest art of one religion and the worst kitsch of the other is, frankly, embarrassing. Why is December the only month in which these conductors consider programming Jewish music?

What is Jewish music—any music written by a Jew? Would that include Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*? Is it any music used in Jewish worship? Would that include Franz Schubert's setting of the *Sabbath Psalm* in Hebrew, composed for Vienna's Seitenstettengasse Temple in 1828? Or is it any traditional music that is unique to Jews? If so, Jewish music comprises an enormous repertoire that spans most of the globe. The fact is, there is no such thing as Jewish music. We must say, instead, there are many Jewish musics. Jewish identity is relative, not absolute. Did Sammy Davis Junior look Jewish? In the eyes of an Ethiopian Jew, does Alan Dershowitz look Jewish? To the ears of an Ethiopian Jew, does klezmer music sound Jewish?

To what extent is music truly an international language? Can music cross borders without a passport? Is Chinese opera as intelligible to me as it is to a person who was raised in that culture? The only respect in which we can state that music is an international language is in the sense that every human society

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on this planet has music. There are societies that do not have money, an alphabet, or war, but anthropologists have yet to find a tribe anywhere on earth that does not make music.

If music is a vehicle of expression, then we learn something about a composer's personality by listening to his or her music. Listening to Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*, we can sense something of the composer's inner struggle. At the same time, we can sense something about the society to which Beethoven belonged (or the society against which he rebelled), the turmoil of a Europe engulfed in war, striving for emancipation.

We teach music, listen to music, and perform music, for its own sake, certainly. Music has its own intrinsic meaning and its own intrinsic rewards. We also use music as a means of broadening our horizons, experiencing new emotions, understanding what it was like to live in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century. The wider we cast our net, the broader we become as human beings, the more capable we are of far-reaching empathy. When we sing a freedom song from South Africa or a song of anguish from the Holocaust, our lives may become utterly changed.

Must you be Jewish to conduct Jewish choral music? Must you be Italian to conduct Monteverdi? Must you be Lutheran to conduct a Bach cantata? Must you be Catholic to conduct a Bruckner Mass? Must you be white to conduct Stravinsky? Must you be black to conduct spirituals? Must you be deaf to conduct Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*? These are not merely glib questions; they provoke us to think about the roles of cultural (or religious) insider and outsider.

Perhaps it's time to rethink the "ethnic and multicultural" R&S category. Have we created a ghetto for non-Western music? What exactly does "ethnic and multicultural" mean? non-Western music? exotic music? I would suggest that Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and Verdi's *Requiem* are more exotic to the average American kid than the gospel songs or the freedom songs from South Africa that we call "ethnic and multicultural."

Do not program music because of pressure from the school board or the PTA, because of white guilt or political correctness. Do so only if you are passionate about that music—if you believe it has an extraordinary effect on you, and you feel compelled to share that remarkable experience with others.

—CJ—

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