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Defending Salamone Rossi: The Transformation and Justification of Jewish Music in Renaissance Italy

JOSHUA R. JACOBSON

Imagine yourself in a synagogue in Venice some four hundred years ago; Shylock's synagogue. What would the service sound like? You would probably hear the cantor and the entire congregation chanting in the traditional Jewish manner, in free rhythm, without musical instruments. The cantor might have a few "assistants," improvising drones or primitive harmonies. The music would be improvised within the proper ancient Middle Eastern modes, resulting in a rich semi-coordinated heterophony of sound.

We have an interesting source that describes Italian synagogue music from this period. In 1608 the Englishman Thomas Coryat set out on a tour across the European continent. After his return he published his impressions of the countries in which he had traveled. The following is an excerpt from the chapter, "Observations of Venice," in which he describes the music of the synagogue.

> ... an exceeding loud yaling, undecent roaring, and as it were a beastly bellowing of it forth. And that after such a confused and hudling manner, that I thinke the hearers can very hardly understand him: sometimes he cries out alone, and sometimes againe some others serving as it were his Clerkes hard without his seate, and within, do roare with him, but so that his voyce (which he straineth so high as if he sung for a wager) drowneth all the rest.[1]

Perhaps Coryat was portraying the synagogue in a negative light for theological reasons; the church had to be seen (and heard) as being superior to the synagogue, which it had superseded. Perhaps he could simply not bridge the cultural gap; Jewish chanting, still based on Middle-eastern styles, must have generated a sharp cognitive dissonance with his experiences of church music, whether Renaissance polyphony or orderly plainchant, performed by professional singers and instrumentalists. Or perhaps Coryat was not biased; perhaps the chanting in that Venetian synagogue was performed by untalented laymen with little regard to any aesthetic consideration.

Whatever the reason, these words must have wounded the progressive Jews of northern Italy. This was a community that had enjoyed unusually close and cordial relations with their Christian neighbors. Prof. Benjamin Ravid has enabled us to reevaluate our concept of the ghettos of northern Italy.[2] By the beginning of the *seicento* many Jews had risen to positions of prominence and wealth as bankers, scholars, writers, actors, and musicians. The establishment of the ghetto was seen by many as a blessing, a rare opportunity for Jews to own property and to live in close proximity to Christians. The harsh rules of gate-closing often went unenforced. An enlightened Jewish education included the study of Renaissance art and music as well as classic and contemporary literature in Italian and Latin. Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* was the model for these well-to-do Jews. And their spiritual spokesman was Rabbi Leon Modena.

Rabbi Leon (Yehudah Aryeh) Modena (1571-1648) was one of the most colorful figures in the Jewish Renaissance. Born in Venice, he traveled extensively among the various cities in the region. He made his living teaching and preaching in synagogues, schools, and private homes; composing poems on commission for various noblemen; and as an assistant printer. In addition, he acquired and lost considerable sums in various games of chance. He was an accomplished musician, and served as cantor in the Italian Synagogue in Venice. He was also a talented composer and conductor of concerted music. In 1628 he became director of Venice's

Academia degl' Impediti, an ensemble of musicians in the Jewish ghetto.

In 1622 Modena wrote, "Shall the prayers and praises of our musicians become objects of scorn among the nations? Shall they say that we are no longer masters of the art of music and that we cry out to the God of our fathers like dogs and ravens?"[3] Modena acknowledged the degraded state of synagogue music in his own time, but indicates that it was not always so. In the same essay he quotes Emanuel of Rome, a Jewish poet from the early fourteenth century, who wrote, "What does the science of music say to the Christians? 'Indeed I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews.'" Using the words of Joseph from the book of Genesis, Modena was hinting that the rituals and the music of the Catholic church had been derived from those of ancient Israel, an assertion that has been echoed by many scholars, both ancient and modern.[4]

Modena indulges in hyperbole in his description of the culture of ancient Israel.

> For wise men in all fields of learning flourished in Israel in former times. All noble sciences sprang from them; therefore the nations honored them and held them in high esteem so that they soared as if on eagles' wings. Music was not lacking among these sciences; they possessed it in all its perfection and others learned it from them. ... However, when it became their lot to dwell among strangers and to wander to distant lands where they were dispersed among alien peoples, these vicissitudes caused them to forget all their knowledge and to be devoid of all wisdom.

Is Modena overly apologetic in his description of the current state of synagogue music? Is this the ages-old Jewish quandary of "what will the *goyim* think?" Perhaps Modena was so embarrassed by his own synagogue culture that he set out on a campaign to reform it, to make it more consonant with that of his Christian neighbors.

The Christians of Italy saw their Renaissance as a re-awakening of culture after the "Dark Ages" of the previous centuries. For Rabbi Leon Modena, his young friend, the musician Salamone Rossi, would herald the Jewish re-awakening.

> For there has arisen in Israel (thank God) ... a very talented man, accustomed to performing with singers before princes, dukes and nobles. After the splendor of the people had been dimmed by the passage of days and years, he restored their crown to its ancient state as in the days of the Levites on their platforms. He set the words of the Psalms to music that was published, joyous songs before the Ark on Sabbaths, feasts and festivals. No longer will arrogant opponents utter bitter words about the Hebrew folk. They will see that it too possesses talent, the equal of the best endowed.

We know very little about Rossi's life. He was born circa 1570 and died some time after 1628, possibly in 1630. He is listed as a violinist and composer on the payroll of the Gonzaga dukes, rulers of Mantua. His numerous madrigals, canzonets, trio sonatas, and dances were published and frequently reprinted in his lifetime. The Mantuan archives also reveal that he was associated with a Jewish theater company, as composer or performer or both. In addition Rossi was also writing motets for the synagogue using contemporary Italian styles. He was encouraged in this endeavor by Rabbi Modena, who urged the composer to have this music published so that it could have an even greater impact.

> From the time I first became his close friend, I too urged him strongly with many words of persuasion until we were successful. Thanks to the Creator of all, that which

> I hoped for has been realized and he has agreed to fulfill his pledge and bring his music to print as he had promised.

In 1622 the publishing house of Bragadini in Venice issued thirty three of Rossi's synagogue motets in a collection edited and with a lengthy preface by Rabbi Modena. Figure 1 on the accompanying CD shows the title page of the *basso* part book. It is almost entirely in Hebrew, an indication even to those who might not get beyond the first page that this was a publication intended for use by the Jews of Italy. A translation appears below.

> Bass / The Songs / of Solomon / Psalms, songs and hymns of praise that / have been composed according to the science of music / for three, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 voices / by the honored master Salamone Rossi, may his Rock keep him and save him / a resident of the holy congregation of Mantua / to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing His most exalted name on all / sacred occasions. A new thing / in the land. / Here in Venice, 1622 / at the command of their Lordships / Pietro and Lorenzo Bragadini / in the house of Giovanni Calleoni / [in Italian:] By the distinguished Lords / Pietro and Lorenzo Bragadini.

Figure 2 shows a sample page of music from the *basso* part book. The music is for a four-part setting of Psalm 137, *al naharot bavel* (By the Waters of Babylon). The notation style is typical for music of this period, but the lyrics have been printed in Hebrew characters, creating a conflict between two orthographies, one left-to-right and the other right-to-left. Rabbi Modena explained, "It will be seen that the author has found it preferable to have the reader follow the words of the Psalms, which are in any case familiar to all, as if backwards, rather than to reverse the customary order of the notes and have his eyes turn to the right to begin (after the Hebrew manner of writing) for this would confuse them."

This extraordinary publication represented a huge innovation. To our knowledge, it was the first time the Hebrew synagogue liturgy had ever been set as polyphonic choral music. Polyphony in the Christian church had begun centuries earlier, and had been evolving from the early organum of the Notre Dame cathedral, but polyphony in the synagogue began with one bold move, basically appropriating the late Renaissance style of the church. We can infer that in a few Italian synagogues, while most of the service was still chanted in the old manner, at a few points the cantor, joined by several men from the congregation, would perform this radical new music.

Rossi's settings are quite different from the traditional semi-improvised liturgical music of the synagogue. It was sung by a small group that had been rehearsing; during their performance the rest of the congregation would be silent. The cantor would be just another one of the men in this small choir. While traditional synagogue music was rhythmically free, this music has a steady beat (or *tactus*). This music is tonal, bearing no relation to the Middle Eastern modes. Unlike traditional synagogue music, which is monophonic (or heterophonic), this music is polyphonic. It sounds virtually indistinguishable from a church motet, except for one thing: the language is Hebrew—the lyrics are from the liturgy of the synagogue, where this music was performed.

There was bound to be a conflict between the modern Jews who had been influenced by the Italian Renaissance and who supported this innovation, and those with a more conservative theology and praxis. In 1605 there was an incident in a synagogue in Ferrara. Let's hear about it in the words of Rabbi Modena.

> We have six or eight knowledgeable men, who know something about the science of song, i.e. "[polyphonic] music," men of our

congregation (may their Rock keep and save them), who on holidays and festivals raise their voices in the synagogue and joyfully sing songs, praises, hymns and melodies such as *Ein Keloheinu, Aleinu Leshabeah, Yigdal, Adon Olam* etc. to the glory of the Lord in an orderly relationship of the voices according to this science [polyphonic music]. ... Now a man[5] stood up to drive them out with the utterance of his lips, answering [those who enjoyed the music], saying that it is not proper to do this, for rejoicing is forbidden, and song is forbidden, and hymns set to artful music have been forbidden since the Temple was destroyed.

Why such a violent objection? For centuries Jews in the Diaspora by and large had followed the instructions of community leaders who tried to ensure that the people would maintain their unique cultural and religious identity. They cited these proof texts: "You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws" (Lev 18:3), and "Rejoice not, O Israel, as other nations do." (Hosea 9:1). Throughout the European Diaspora Jews constituted only a tiny minority; they were subject to the temptations of acculturation and to pressure from their Christian hosts to abandon their religion. For the rabbis, maintaining a unique identity meant, inter alia, that Jews would refrain from singing songs of their non-Jewish neighbors. Furthermore, the rabbis forbade almost all joyous music. Musical instruments were associated with partying, and Jews were told that as long as they were in exile they were in a state of mourning. Rabbi Yohanan (third century Palestine) wrote, "Whoever drinks while listening to four singers with musical instruments brings five punishments to the world."[6] Jews were expected to emulate the Levite musicians exiled in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion. There on the willows we hung up our lyres, for our captors asked us there for songs; our tormentors, for amusement, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." But how can we sing a song of the LORD on alien soil? (Psalm 137)

The great philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) stressed the historical reasons for Jews refraining from music. "[The rabbis at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple] prohibited playing musical instruments, singing songs and making any sound resembling song. It is forbidden to have any pleasure therein, and it is forbidden to listen to them because of the destruction [of the Temple]."[7] However there were exceptions to this ban on music. Music was allowed, even required, to enhance a religious imperative (mitzvah) such as the imperative to rejoice at a wedding. The medieval Rabbis known as the Tosafists clarified that there are no restrictions on singing at a wedding. "Singing which is associated with a mitzvah is permitted, for example, rejoicing with bride and groom at the wedding feast."[8] The other major exception was for the sacred service. The rabbis cited a verse from Proverbs as a reason to beautify the liturgy with music. "If you have a pleasant voice, chant the liturgy and stand before the Ark [as leader], for it is written, 'Honor the Lord with your wealth' (Proverbs 3:9) ['wealth' means the talent] with which God has endowed you."[9]

But the antagonism towards music, especially non-traditional music, remained strong. Anticipating objections over Rossi's musical innovations, and perhaps reflecting discussions that were already going on in Venice or Mantua, Rabbi Modena wrote a lengthy preface in which he refuted the arguments against polyphony in the synagogue.

To remove all criticism from misguided hearts, should there be among our exiles some over-pious soul (of the kind who

> reject everything new and seek to forbid all knowledge which they cannot share) who may declare this [style of sacred music] forbidden because of things he has learned without understanding, I have found it advisable to include in this book a responsum that I wrote eighteen years ago when I taught the Torah in the Holy Congregation of Ferrara (may He protect them, Amen) to silence one who made confused statements about the same matter.

He immediately cites the liturgical exception to the ban on music.

> Who does not know that all authorities agree that all forms of singing are completely permissible in connection with the observance of the ritual commandments? ... I do not see how anyone with a brain in his skull could cast any doubt on the propriety of praising God in song in the synagogue on special Sabbaths and on festivals. ... The cantor is urged to intone his prayers in a pleasant voice. If he were able to make his one voice sound like ten singers, would this not be desirable? ... and if it happens that they harmonize well with him, should this be considered a sin? ... Are these individuals on whom the Lord has bestowed the talent to master the technique of music to be condemned if they use it for His glory? For if they are, then cantors should bray like asses and refrain from singing sweetly lest we invoke the prohibition against vocal music.

But what about the objection that Rossi was abandoning the Jewish modes, introducing into the synagogue music that was modern, that was European, that was based on Christian liturgical music and secular music? Rabbi Samuel ben Elhanan Archivolti (1515-1611, Padua) had written, "How can we justify the actions of a few cantors of our day, who chant the holy prayers to the tunes of popular secular songs? While reading sacred texts they are thinking of obscenities and lewd things."[10]

The practice of using secular melodies in the synagogue was (and still is) a matter of no little controversy.[11] Rossi borrowed freely from the techniques of popular secular and sacred music, with which he was well acquainted. Since Rossi's day job was to provide musical entertainment to the Gonzaga court in Mantua, he was well acquainted with the styles of the day. The most popular music in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century was the *balletto*, a light love song, strophic (the same music repeats for every verse), based on strong dance rhythms, often performed by five voices, usually in triple meter. Typical is Giovanni Gastoldi's "L'innamorato" (The Lover Boy), the first verse of which is shown in figure 3. Gastoldi was a neighbor of Rossi's. Did the style rub off? Rossi's setting of the *Kaddish*, the Jewish doxology, features the same strong dance rhythms, performed by five voices, in a triple meter, with the same music being repeated for an artificial division of the text into six "verses." The first verse of Rossi's *Kaddish* is shown in figure 4.

Modena defended the incorporation of the styles of popular dance music into the synagogue by emphasizing the positive intent of Rossi's actions. "Offering his powers to his God, he took from the secular that he might add to the sacred, honoring his Divine Benefactor with the talent that God bestowed on him."

Rossi even borrowed from the styles of Christian sacred music. The opening phrase of his motet, *Elohim Hashivenu*, is remarkably similar to that of the motet *Cum essem parvulus*, composed by Orlando di Lasso and published in 1582 (see figs. 5 and 6).

What justification could Modena offer for this controversial acculturation? Once again, he had to counter that Rossi's intent to praise God qualified as a *mitzvah*, and therefore overrode the ban. The sixteenth century code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh*, poses the question,

"What about a cantor who stretches out the prayers to show off his pleasant voice?" The answer is given as follows, "If his motivation is to praise God with a beautiful melody, then let him be blessed, and let him chant with dignity and awe. But if his motivation is merely to show off, then this is a waste of the congregation's time."[12] Accordingly, Rossi wrote in the preface to his published music, "I composed these songs not for my own honor but for the honor of my Father in heaven who created this soul within me. For this, I will give thanks to Him evermore."[13]

Thus Modena had to defend Jewish music not just on one front, but on two. Modena and Rossi were battling the conservative elements in the Jewish community. The main thrust of Modena's preface was to silence the criticisms of the "over-pious souls" and "misguided hearts." Most studies of Rossi's music have focused on this defense. But a closer reading reveals that Modena was also sensitive to the criticisms heard from non-Jewish sources. His goal in promoting Rossi's synagogue polyphony, perhaps his primary goal, was to counter the impression that Jewish music was second-rate. He worked not only to create a renaissance of Jewish music, but also to raise the status of the Jew in the eyes of the Christian community.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* (London: Stansby, 1611) 231-33; reprint (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Son, 1905) 370-72. A century earlier François Tissard, a Frenchman, wrote of his visit to a synagogue in Ferrara, "I strongly desired to witness their rituals, to hear their singing and to comprehend their mysteries. ... You could hear one man howling, another braying and another bellowing. Such a cacophony of discordant sounds do they make! Weighing this with the rest of their rituals, I was almost brought to nausea" (Franciscus Tissardus, *Grammatica Hebraica et Graeca* [Paris, 1508] folio 17b, cited in David Ruderman, *The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol* [Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1981] 101).

2. Benjamin Ravid, "From Geographical Realia to Historiographical Symbol: The Odyssey of the Word *Ghetto*," in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. David B. Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992) 373-85.

3. Leon Modena, Foreword to *Hashirim Asher Lishlomo* by Salamone Rossi (Venice: Bragadini, 1622) n.p. All the quotations from Rabbi Modena are taken from this source. For a modern edition of Rossi's compositions and of the prefaces see the Bibliography.

4. One finds these sentiments echoed nearly three hundred years later. The Russian-American Jewish composer Lazare Saminsky (*Music of the Ghetto and the Bible* [New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1934] 74) reacted furiously to the anti-Semitic statements of Richard Wagner (1850, 1869) and others. "It was not a whim of history to have kept like a lash over the European musical milieu—and for so many decades—the famous diatribes of [Richard] Wagner and of Stewart Houston Chamberlain; the malevolent elegies singing the incapacity of the Jews to create original music, bewailing the judaization of pure Aryan art, the contaminating of the latter with a spirit exotic and commercial, and so on. ... We have come to realize that the Jewish people did not judaize the "Aryan-pure" music of the West. Just the opposite, Jewish music has been itself "aryanized" or "contaminated," partly Europeanized, partly orientalized in the Exile. The mission of a renascent Jewish music is a return to its pure font, to the ancient majestic modes, to the structure of its own aboriginal religious chant which, as the historians insist, was mortar for the early Christian church song."

5. Don Harran identifies this man as Rabbi Moses Coimbran.

6. Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 48a.

7. Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, The Laws of Fasting* 5:14.

8. Tosafot to *Gitin* 7a.

9. *Midrash Tanhuma Re'eh* chapter 9.

10. Samuel Archivolti (1515-1611), *Arugat Ha-bosem* (Venice, 1602), quoted in *Hebrew Writings concerning Music in Manuscripts and Printed Books from Geonic Times up to 1800*, ed. Israel Adler (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1975) 100.

11. See Joshua Jacobson, "Contrafaction," in *Journal of Synagogue Music* 34 (2009) (forthcoming).

12. *Shulhan Arukh* 53:11-12.

13. Salamone Rossi, *Hashirim Asher Lishlomo* (Venice: Bragadini, 1622) n.p. Although these pious and erudite words are attributed to Rossi, it is highly likely that they came from the pen of Rabbi Modena, who was known to have served as a ghostwriter for other projects.

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RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS OF THE SACRED MUSIC OF SALAMONE ROSSI:

Musique Judaeo-Baroque, Boston Camerata. Harmonia Mundi CD HMA-1901021.

Salamone Rossi Hebreo: Baroque Music for the Synagogue and the Royal Court, The Zamir Chorale of Boston, The Boston Baroque Ensemble, The Camerata deRossi. HaZamir CD HZ-910.

The Songs of Solomon, The New York Baroque, PGM 108, 113.

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