Joshua Jacobson integrates music, history, academia, and joy

The victory of Jewish music over evil

By ANDREA JACOBS
IJN Senior Writer

On a summer’s day in 1999, Prof. Joshua Jacobson raised his hands to conduct the Zamir Chorale of Boston in a sunlit courtyard at Auschwitz. No one else was around. “For many of us,” Jacobson gently reminded the ensemble, “this is how we pray.” So they prayed. Voices soared in unison until one by one they broke under the unbearable weight of history. The conductor continued, moving his arms as tears lodged inarticulate stones in countless throats.

People choked. They couldn’t get the notes out,” Jacobson recalls in the IJN conference room. But he was confident the group’s courageous spirit would prevail. And he was right. The 1999 concert tour, which commemorated the Boston chorale’s 30th anniversary and the centenary of the Zamir “nightingale” in Holocaust-era movement’s first choral work in Lodz, Poland, reintroduced Jewish music to Eastern Europe for the first time since the Holocaust.

The singers were visibly moved on several occasions: in the original hall at the Lodz Choral Society Hazonam, founded in 1899 and active in the Lodz ghetto until annihilation; the dimly lit stage at the Warsaw Conference Room. But the memorable moment came when they stood in the ruins of the Lodz ghetto and sang “Tishrei.”

“People treated us like royalty,” recalls Jacobson, pinned between a few experts on Jewish music in the Holocaust. A “renaissance and a rebirth,” he suggests that some of the rabbinic prohibitions against music, such as not listening to Greek composers, derived from the desire to maintain a cohesive and distinct Jewish society.

There were two musical “commandments” regarding popular entertainment: A wedding was not considered kosher without a band; and “on Purim, anything goes — especially music,” says Jacobson.

For countless centuries, Middle Eastern chants dominated Jewish music. While this hypothesis is still out of favor, it resonates in Jacobson’s heart. “I lament their loss,” he says.

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Cantor Salomon Sulzer, who established a Christian style that was performed by the rabbis decreed, “no music” and “no dance to. I’m no halachic expert, but I don’t think they meant abstaining from a Mahler symphony. So they said no music, period.”

Jacobson feels the rabbinic reaction to the aesthetic that blanketed the US after Sept. 11. “In the aftermath of that national disaster, people were not in the mood for upbeat music.

Eventually, Jews who established a fairly good existence in the US wanted music to flow again and the rabbis acquiesced. “So the rabbis stepped in and made laws that prohibited this,” Jacobson says. “One rabbi even said, ‘The ear that listens to music should be cut off.’”

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“‘Oh look at this fascinating culture we almost wiped out,’” he says sarcastically. “That’s what it’s all about.”

Jazz music, he acknowledges. “But if we ignore the incredible Jewish culture that Jews feel comfortable with that idea,” Jacobson says, “It’s like saying ‘we were going to wipe out the Jews was right.”

protection for entertainment,” he says. “But it wasn’t only about mourning. It was a triumphant return, a renaissance and a rebirth.”

“Even at Auschwitz I felt that.”

Northern Italy. The Zamir Chorale incorporates several of Rossi’s works in its repertoire.

The Holocaust, or Jewish enlightenment that gradually seeped through Germany, Galicia, Lithuania, Russia and parts of Poland from the 1770s to 1850s, left an indelible stamp on Jewish music.

Cantor Salomon Sulzer, who gained a large Jewish following in 19th-century Vienna, became famous throughout the world for his choir music. “His compositions are still performed today,” Jacobson says. “Except people don’t know Sulzer wrote them.”

“They think these melodies were written by G-d and handed down to Moses at Mt. Sinai.”

In ancient Israel, “there was a lot of secular music primarily used for entertainment,” he says. “But in terms of formal music, we know there was a professional ensemble of Levine musicians in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Accompanied by trumpet-like horns, they performed in Temple rituals until the magnificent edifice was destroyed. Music crawled out of the rubble when the Second Temple was rebuilt 70 years later.

“Tishrei” means “new year,” and “on Purim, anything goes — especially music,” says Jacobson.


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aspired," he says. "The current state of Jewish liturgical music, Jacobson comments, is deplorable. "I collected some articles recently from all the Jewish denominations that bemoan contemporary music in the synagogues," he says. "Music is the gateway to prayer. Unfortunately, in many synagogues today, music is entertainment — merely songs we sing. Which is great for socializing and a sense of group solidarity. But are you spiritually uplifted by this music? Does it connect you to the divine?"

Jacobson’s modern Orthodox synagogue offers a choral service once a month. Everyone receives sheet music, Siddurim, and sings the entire service in four-part harmony. "The first time we did this we set up 40 chairs and 120 people showed up," he says. "Obviously there’s a thirst for this kind of experience."

But you don’t always have to sing to achieve inspiration, Jacobson adds. "Sometimes it’s possible to listen and be inspired. One has to find the right balance. You can participate with your mouth, and you can participate with your ears, brain and soul."

"I think there has to be room for both encounters in the synagogue."

Jacobson, 64, comes from a family that was “deeply Jewish and deeply artistic.” His father was a visual artist and his mother was a decorator. "There was a lot of singing in our house around the table on Shabbat and on holidays."

The family’s Jewish friends and artistic friends inhabited different spheres and rarely mingled. Although he took piano lessons, Jacobson somehow convinced his mother to let him quit. "It was the ’60s," he smiles. "I wanted to play guitar. I was even in a semi-professional folk singing duo with my friend."

Jacobson had no use for classical music until he attended Camp Yavneh, a Zionist camp in New Hampshire, where music counselor Stanley Sperber decided to initiate a choir. "My first reaction was, ‘What do I need a choir for? I can make better harmony with my buddy.’ Then I saw what Sperber was doing."

His decades-old epiphany still elicits a gasp. "Four-part harmony. Sophisticated music. That’s when I knew I wanted to be involved in Jewish choral music for the rest of my life."

Sperber, who started the Zamir Chorale in New York, approached Jacobson about launching the Zamir Chorale of Boston in 1969. "I had just finished four years of undergraduate studies as a music student at Brandeis University. I had no idea what I was doing. But I had been exposed to Jewish music and I knew I wanted to stay in Jewish circles."

"You can participate with your mouth, or with your cars, brain and soul"
Breathing life into the silenced voices

Jacobson (second row, far right) is the founder and artistic director of the Zamir Chorale of Boston, which has performed in Berlin, Eastern Europe, Israel and throughout the US. The chorale also was invited to sing at the UN’s first International Day to Commemorate Victims of the Holocaust in 2006.

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Jacobson says prayer reweaves the lyrics of Yiddish folk songs to reflect the new and horrifying reality of the Holocaust.

“Abraham Goldfaden’s lullaby ‘Raisins and Almonds’ — ‘Roshes met Mandlen’ — was changed to say, ‘No more raisins, no more almonds’ in the Lodz ghetto, he says.

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art and conduct Salomone Rossi.”

In addition to works crafted by Jewish composers, he has conducted Boethoven’s “Mass in C,” Handel’s “Messiah,” Mozart’s “Requiem,” Poulsen’s “Gloria” and Schubert’s “Mass in E-Flat.”

“Schubert makes me a better conductor of Sulzer,” he says. “Conducting Mendelssohn makes me a better conductor of Lewandowski. Conducting Monteverdi helps me better conduct Salomone Rossi.”

Several years ago Jacobson was teaching at Northeastern University, where he is a professor and music director of choral activities, when the universe conspired against him: for an endowed professorship in Holocaust studies.

“It was only open to existing faculty,” he recalls. “I applied to do a project related to music in the Holocaust, and was accepted. That’s how I got involved in the Holocaust field.”

“When I started reading the literature, boy did I get depressed,” Jacobson says.

“But as I read about what music was able to do for the Jews it became inspirational — especially how music frequently helped holocaust concentration camp inmates maintain their sense of humanity in the face of all odds.”

For example, the doomed artists during a performance: unisonality. According to Jacobson, “A loud D is the concluding phrase of Max Janowski’s ‘Rim Shalom’ that’s absolute torture for many second sopranos.

No matter how hard they try to reach it while driving alone in the car, the note eludes them.

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“There are many ways to access a peak experience, and music is one of them,” Jacobson says. “Many rabbis argue that prayer without music is unacceptable. If you’re in need of inspiration, go sing. Find the right tune.”

The sociologist Benedict Anderson says of the sound emitted by a group of individuals singing one note in unison, which is the foundation of choral music.

There’s even a word for the powerful emotion that engulfs singers during a performance: unisonality. Jacobson says “And you son came up with the concept of unisonality, Jacobson says. “You can feel it when you sing in harmony with the people around you.”

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