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About The Cover:
"The Chapel Choir at Munich, Under the Direction of Roland de Lassus." A
miniature from a choir book by Hans Muelich, 1570, in the Bayerische
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Choral Music for Chanukah

by Joshua R. Jacobson

An article on Chanukah music appears in this issue so that conductors who are interested in performing the music described herein may have time to purchase and rehearse it.

Chanukah is not the Jewish Christmas. True, the two holidays often occur at the same time (Chanukah is an eight-day holiday which begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew lunar month of Kislev). True, in our multi-cultural society, community leaders and educators make an effort to acknowledge the celebrations of many different traditions. True, retailers have extended the market for Christmas sales by inventing the concept of “Chanukah shopping.” But fundamentally the two holidays are quite different.

While Christmas is one of the most important holidays on the Christian liturgical calendar, Chanukah is a minor holiday and a relative latecomer. The first Chanukah was celebrated in the year 164 B.C.E. when the holy Temple in Jerusalem was reconsecrated after a bitter four-year struggle against the Syrian-Hellenistic invaders. The major Jewish festivals such as Passover and Yom Kippur were instituted some 3000 years ago, and their observance is detailed in the Old Testament; Chanukah, on the other hand, is mentioned nowhere in the scriptural canon.

Furthermore, while the celebration of the major Jewish holy days entails cessation from work and a lengthened, more ornate synagogue service, the eight days of Chanukah are regarded as normal workdays, and there is little time in the worship service for musical elaboration.

The liturgy for Chanukah consists of one prayer, Al Hanissim (“For the Miracles”), which is inserted into the daily prayers of supplication, the cantillation of a special lesson from the Pentateuch, and the chanting of the Festival Psalms (113-118). Apart from the liturgy, though, there are festive rituals associated with the celebration of Chanukah in the home. On the eight nights of Chanukah candles are lit in the home by each member of the family, accompanied by the singing of hymns and blessings. Festive meals are prepared, at which special holiday foods are served. It is not surprising then that the richest vein of Chanukah music centers around the home: hymns for the lighting of the candles and folksongs for children.

The best known hymn for Chanukah is Maoz Tsur, generally rendered in English as “Rock of Ages.”

The Hebrew text of this hymn was written in the thirteenth century by the Italian Rabbi, Mordecai Ben Isaac HaLevy, whose name can be found in the initial letters of the five stanzas of the poem.

In America today, the best known melody for this hymn is one which has been sung by European Jewry for over 500 years. Interestingly, it closely resembles three German Folksongs, one of which also served as the inspiration for a Lutheran chorale.

Example 1 shows the Maoz Tsur tune as notated by Cantor Abraham Beer in 1791; Examples 2, 3, and 4 are excerpts from three sixteenth-century German folksongs: “Ich weiss mir ein Meidlein Hübisch und fein,” “Van Coninck Maximilian,” and “So weiss ich ein was mich erbret.” Example 5 is the first phrase of the Lutheran Chorale, “Nun freut euch lieben Christen g’mein.”

There are several choral arrangements of this popular Chanukah hymn. My favorite is the setting by Abraham Binder, with its lush “purple” chromatic harmonies (Example 6).

For centuries, music in the Jewish traditions was transmitted orally; it is rare to find transcriptions into Western notation before the nineteenth century. The oldest printed source of Chanukah music is another melody for the Maoz Tsur hymn, notated by the Italian composer Benedetto Marcello. The story of how an Italian church musician came to publish a synagogue melody is of some interest. On a Chanukah night about 270 years ago, Marcello crossed over from Christian Venice into the Jewish ghetto. He was heading for the great Ashkenazic synagogue, famed for the beautiful music used in its services. Marcello, a

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successful lawyer and politician, was also a composer of church music and about to begin work on his greatest project, *Estro poetico-armonico*, a musical setting of the first fifty Psalms from the Bible. Like other great artists of his time, he felt the need to base his creative work on that of the ancients. But while his contemporaries based their church music on Gregorian chant, Marcello decided to go further back, to the roots of Psalm singing in ancient Jerusalem. And so Marcello entered the synagogue to hear how the Jews were perpetuating their ancient musical traditions. When he published his Psalm settings in 1724, Marcello prefaced some of his compositions with the

**The best known hymn for Chanukah is Maoz Tsur, generally rendered in English as “Rock of Ages.”**

Jewish melodies which he had transcribed, the Hebrew text and music reading from right to left. Marcello used the Maoz Tsur melody as the basis for his setting of Psalm 15 (in Italian). Example 7 reproduces Marcello's rendition of the Venetian Maoz Tsur melody and a modern transcription of the tune.

Several twentieth-century composers have arranged the Venetian Maoz Tsur for chorus. Hugo Chaim Adler, a cantor from Worcester, Massachusetts, and the father of composer Samuel Adler, made a lovely arrangement in a straight-forward homophonic setting, substituting for the original text a paraphrase of Psalm 137, By

**Example 1**

*Moos Zur*

Abraham Beer, Baal Tefillah, 1791

Example 2

*Ich Weiss ein Meidlene hübsch und fein*

Reutherriche Liedlein, 1544

Example 3

*Van Coninck Maximilian*

Sonterliederkens ad Ps. 41, 1540

Example 4

*So weiss ich eins*

Franz Böhme, Altdeutsches Liederbuch, 1877

Example 5

*Nun freut euch lieben Christen gmein*

M. Luther, Wittenberg, 1520
Maoz Tsur

arranged by Abraham Binder

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the Waters of Babylon (Example 8). A setting by the prominent New York composer Hugo Weisgall is quite different. He uses the original text (with an alternate singable English translation), and his tasteful, dry, lean style is reminiscent of the neoclassicism of fifty years ago (Example 9).

Perhaps the best known musical setting of the story of Chanukah is George Frideric Handel’s oratorio, Judas Maccabaeus. While the libretto of Judas is based on the exploits of the ancient Jewish freedom fighter as recorded in the Apocrypha, to the 18th century British public, the work also stood as a metaphor for its own national aspirations. In April of 1746, just months before the work was composed, the British army had finally succeeded in ridding the country of a foreign invasion by the Stuarts. Judas was also very popular among the Jews of London; this was

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one of the first important stage productions in England to portray a Jewish national hero in an entirely favorable light.

One would be hard pressed to think of a musical celebration of Chanukah more glorious than Judas Maccabaeus. Conductors with sufficient time and the appropriate forces at their disposal might want to consider a performance of the complete oratorio. Others may wish to program several excerpts. Among the most popular choruses are “See the Conquering Hero Comes” and “Hallelujah, Amen,” either of which can be performed by the average high school chorus. There are a number of editions of the oratorio available. Conductors should be wary,

**Perhaps the best known musical setting of the story of Chanukah is George Frideric Handel’s oratorio, Judas Maccabaeus.**

---

Example 7

**Intonazione degli Ebrei Tedeschi sopra**

Benedetto Marcello

---

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TENOR

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BASS

By the waters, the waters of Babylon

ORGAN or PIANO

Andante molto

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however; some of the editions contain numerous undocumented cuts and changes.

The first choral settings of the traditional melodies for Chanukah were composed by Salomon Sulzer (1804-1890), the famed cantor of the Seitenstettengasse Temple in Vienna,\(^9\) Sulzer's monumental opus, Schir Zion, the first volume of which was published in 1840, comprised the first setting for cantor, choir, and organ of the entire synagogue liturgy.\(^10\) While many of these compositions are quite ornate, Sulzer's contribution for Chanukah is quite modest, consisting merely of a simple arrangement for cantor and choir of the blessings for the lighting of the candles (Example 10).

Sulzer's innovations, however, ushered in a new era of synagogue music. In Paris, the chief cantor, Samuel Naumbourg (1815-1880), composed a complete liturgical cycle, Zemirot Yisrael, which was published in 1847.\(^11\) Naumbourg's collection includes a setting for cantor, choir, and organ of the traditional German melody for Maoz Tsur. In Russia, Cantors Hirsch Weintraub\(^12\) (1817-1881) and Elieser Gerovitch\(^13\) (1844-1914) both composed settings of Chanukah hymns for choir and cantor. Sulzer's most illustrious pupil, Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894), choir director for the Oranienburgerstrasse Temple in Berlin, also composed a setting of the entire liturgical cycle for four-part choir, cantor, and organ.\(^14\) One of Lewandowski's loveliest compositions for Chanukah is HaNetivot Halalulu, a hymn traditionally sung just after the kindling of the Chanukah lights.

Lewandowski's setting reflects his desire to introduce a spirit of dignity, splendour, and majesty into the Jewish service (Example 11).

In 1888 the German composer Max Bruch composed a work for chorus and orchestra entitled, Hebräische Gesänge, the third movement of which uses the German Maoz Tsur melody mentioned above. Although Bruch was not Jewish, he was attracted more than once to Hebrew themes, as is evidenced by his popular Kol Nidre for cello and orchestra, based on the well-known melody for the Yom Kippur service.

The genesis of Hebräische Gesänge goes back to 1815 when Lord Byron had written a cycle of poems on Old Testament themes. Byron presented his poems to Isaac Nathan, a young composer of "musical farces and operatic works" and invited him to set them to music. Nathan, who had some background in the Jewish liturgy, chose to set the poems to

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existing Jewish melodies. It is curious that Nathan chose the festive Maoz Tsur hymn as his melody for the somber poem, On Jordan’s Banks, a lament for the Jewish exile. At any rate, Bruch’s arrangement of Nathan’s setting is a dramatic composition, calling for mixed chorus (divisi), large orchestra, and organ.

In the twentieth century a number of choral composers began to create a more sizeable repertoire of music for Chanukah. There are several reasons for this surge of inspiration. One is the growth of Jewish choral societies,

Transcontinental Publications has just initiated a new series entitled, “Chanukah Around the World.” So far, two octavos have been released in this series; each can be sung in either Hebrew or English.

which first appeared at the turn of the century in Eastern Europe and soon spread to the United States and Israel. Another is the recent interest among community and public school groups in representing a diversity of holiday traditions. Unfortunately, much of the repertoire of recent vintage has been hastily crafted to meet the needs of the moment. Nonetheless, one can find a number of works that are of more than passing interest.

Arise and Be Free is a suite of four a cappella choral songs for Chanukah

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Example 10

Chanukah Candle Lighting Blessings

Salomon Sulzer
Edited by Joshua R. Jacobson

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by Steven Barnett of Minnesota. Each of the four is based on a well-known Ashkenazi Chanukah children's song. The settings are challenging, but fun to sing and fun to listen to, making frequent use of jazz rhythms and chords.

Transcontinental Publications has just initiated a new series entitled, "Chanukah Around the World." So far, two octaves have been released in this series; each can be sung in either Hebrew or English. Aledh Neir/Rise Up My Light is by the Israeli-American composer, Chaim Parchi. In it a beautiful lyrical melody is set in a jewel-like background in which the chorus imitates the sound of bells. Mi Zeh Yemaled/I Sing of the Wonders is a setting by the present author of a Moroccan folksong. The exotic modality of the original melody is complemented with a non-Western style of polyphony and the addition of tambourine and clay drum. To be released later this year is Al HaNissim/Sing to God, an arrangement for chorus and piano (with optional band) of a klezmer-style tune by Dov Frimer.

From the same publisher are Herbert Fromm's Hanukah Madrigal, a beautifully crafted contrapuntal setting of a traditional Ashkenazi folksong, and Light the Legend, an original composition by Michael Isaacson, employing some of the rhythms and modes characteristic of modern Israeli folk song. Both works can be sung in either Hebrew or English.

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children's song for Chanukah, arranged by Matthew Lazar. The present author's *Chanukah Variations* is a humorous composition based on an old Ashkenazic children's song. Each variation has a unique character, ranging in style from the traditional hymn to nineteenth-century bombast to contemporary jazz and aleatoric techniques.

Many conductors annually undertake a search for repertoire suitable for Chanukah that can be introduced into a December concert. This article is not a comprehensive list of choral music for Chanukah; rather, it is an attempt to present a broad selection of repertoire for mixed chorus based on the experience of numerous concerts and the reactions of singers and audiences.

Notes

8 Polyphony is not found in Jewish music (with rare exceptions) until the nineteenth century. The Rabbis zealously (but not always successfully) guarded lest the chants from the ancient Middle Eastern homeland become diluted through contact with Western music. And so, synagogue music retained many of its Mediterranean characteristics: it was, by and large, modal, melismatic, monophonic, and male dominated.
9 Sulzer’s legendary singing attracted the notice of music lovers from a variety of backgrounds, including Franz Liszt, who wrote in 1859, “We went to the synagogue to hear (Sulzer). For moments we could penetrate into his real soul and recognize the secret doctrines of the fathers. Seldom were we so deeply stirred by emotion as on that evening, so shaken that our soul was entirely given over to meditation and participation in the service.” (quoted in A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, p. 283.)

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15 “Ashkenazic” refers to the Jewish traditions which originated in Northern Europe. The other two main divisions are “Sephardic,” referring to the Jews of Spanish origin, and “Oriental,” referring to the Jews who lived in the Arab lands of the Middle East.

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