Sweet Sounds at Synagogue

by Robert L. Cohen

"You find the soul of a people," wrote Samson Raphaelson in the preface to his play *The Jazz Singer*, "in the songs they sing." As well, our Jewish music tends to take on the coloration of its surrounding culture—its time and place. So what about the religious songs—liturgical prayers and hymns—that American Jews sing at the end of the 20th century? What do they say about how we live in America? About how we talk to God—and to each other?

Ours is (often, still, to the displeasure of the classicists) a highly informal society, so our liturgical music also tends to be informal, whereas the so-called "edifice music" composed for the "cathedral synagogues" of Europe (and of America through the 1950s) valued, instead, the stately, the dignified, the decorous. *Our* music is music of intimacy and healing, rather than florid declamation. It is music that affords us some sense of ownership.

What composer Michael Isaacson calls our "American disdain for elitism" along with what sociologist Samuel Heilman dubs our "do-it-yourself culture" have demanded a more inclusive and participatory as well as more informal music—a folk music. Popular examples of this include Debbie Friedman and the late Shlomo Carlebach. The style and even the instrumentation of our religious music today—the inviting guitar rather than the distancing organ; congregational melodies in preference to coloratura solos; a cappella rather than cantor-and-choir settings—reflect these spiritual needs and, perhaps, their accompanying aesthetic sensibilities—and may serve to attract young Jews, in particular, as well.

The music of Baby Boomer Judaism is, as one would expect, at home in America—comfortably "living in two cultures," as the sociologists say. So the dynamic, multicultural eclecticism of American culture and America's music finds its expression in Jewish bluegrass and country, Jewish reggae and Jewish "world music," Jewish rock and even Jewish rap.

Yet a distinctly European-in-origin Judaism also has been a remarkable influence on today's Jewish music, as on Jewish renewal generally: the philosophy, and especially the music—the folk-style spiritual melodies called *niggunim*—of Chasidism. The strong democratic element in Chasidism—God valued sincerity in worship above all else, and every Jew could, potentially, offer that—certainly spoke to the anti-elitism of 1960s and post-'60s America, and was very much expressed in Chasidism's intensely devotional music. And that music's prayerful quality expressed the yearning many American Jews felt for deeper spiritual meaning and a sense of connection—to God and, especially, to each other—in their lives.

But equally important was another watchword of Chasidism, taken—and embraced—from the Psalms: Serve God with joy!

Cantor Sherwood Goffin of Manhattan's Lincoln Square Synagogue notes that "Jews used to come to synagogue to cry." "The ghetto Jew," wrote music historian Peter Gradenwitz, "looked backwards and complained of his mournful fate." But the Jews of today—like those of the 1960s—no longer have to sing in sorrow; in a largely benign America, this has been a time (to quote from Ira Gershwin's "Stairway to Paradise") for gladness, not sadness.

Above all, today's Jewish music has reflected our distinctly American pragmatism: Whatever *works*—to bring us closer to God, or each other; to express our exuberance or our spiritual longings—is okay.

"If you cannot concentrate in prayer, search for melodies, and if you pray choose a tune you like. Then your heart will feel what your tongue speaks; for it is the song that makes your heart respond" (Yehuda ben Samuel of Regensburg).—*Robert L. Cohen*

Robert L. Cohen lectures widely on American Jewish music and served as music director of the forthcoming compilation CD, "Open the Gates! New American Jewish Music for Prayer."