Expanding Our Musical Boundaries: Beyond the Criterion of "Singability"

Bob Gluck

Reconstructionism Today (6:4, Summer 1999)

Music is an astonishing thing. We all live in incredibly rich sound environments, be they the woods or the city streets. Music is the structuring of sound, and it can include sounds that we hear as well as sounds that we create. Mordecai Kaplan once referred to art, including music, as "part of the social heritage which is the driving force of the civilization" and "the rhythms into which the emotions of a civilization fall at their moments of highest power and intensity. . ." Music is surely a central feature of human culture, and it can include a far wider range of sound possibilities than we usually consider.

Music has a magical quality, communicating ideas and feelings beyond words. It can be a vehicle for the expression of the most transcendent ideas and experiences. Holiness is not an idea that can be contained, yet we find that music can express something of its power. Some of the most remarkable music has been composed to express religious feelings. Consider Bach's B Minor Mass, Bernstein's Jeremiah Symphony, Penderecki's St. Luke Passion. Spirituality and music share many common goals, seeking to place us in touch with our deepest inner feelings, to connect with our sense of divinity, to evoke the mysterious and wondrous.

Some years ago, the influential teacher Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi wrote an imaginative call to musicians to perform at a celestial concert on the steps of the once-standing Temple in Jerusalem. The music played on those steps ceased with the passing of the ancient Israelite religion and with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. This proposed concert of Jewish liturgical musics would be akin to a festival choreographed by a Jewish Charles Ives, where every conceivable musical sound would echo from every mountain and valley. Music on such a scale has not been heard in Jewish life for two millenia, when the last musical note of our ancient tradition left a harp or voice floating to people1s ears and dissipating into the air, vanishing forever.

The sacred sounds of ancient Jerusalem were replaced by the wonderful chant that we call nusah, the melodies to which biblical and prayer texts were set. This largely solo form of chant made sense because Jewish music needed to be as portable as Jews themselves. Solo chanting is an excellent way to preserve words of importance and they are easily taught. There is a beauty to solo chanting and I personally love singing it. But something vast and mysterious was lost to Jewish culture, something that has never returned. In comparison to the ancient music, the sounds of our culture are relatively contained.

In fact, Jewish tradition since the days of the Temple has reflected a deep ambivalence about music. Many of the rabbinic sages over the ages were troubled by the power of music to move the emotions. The rabbis of the Talmud

feared that music would lead to dancing and dancing to sexuality and sexuality to pagan religions. The responsa literature throughout the Middle Ages continued to express ambivalence. Most encouraged only music that served a function, like wedding music or cantorial chant.

There have been, of course, important moments of Jewish musical renaissance. The present, I hope, will prove to be one of these. Among those of the past is the Hasidic movement of the late 1700s, which reached for a spiritual impulse that they felt could be found, the Hasidim believed, beyond the liturgical text. The tradition of niggunim thus arose: melodies, often without words, sung by groups of people for the purpose of reaching deeply beyond themselves.

Another renaissance was the mid-16th to 20th-century resurgence of Jewish music within the Ottomon Empire. The texts from Safed that we know so well from our Kabbalat Shabbat liturgy were set to music that functioned within a rich improvisatory tradition, drawing from the same roots as the music of the Dervishes. Such Jewish traditions of rhythmic and melodic improvisation offer remarkable yet unknown resources for musical renewal. A shift from current musical practice in synagogues and other Jewish domains, however, faces substantial obstacles.

The dawn of modernity witnessed the creation of a new category of Jew—the Westernized participant in European musical culture. Jews were increasingly counted among performers, composers, audience members, and financial supporters of music in the broader community. Jewish musicians have thrived outside of our communal walls ever since,and this freedom to participate in a musical culture has made it unneccesary for them to confine their creativity within what were once ghetto walls. Musicians of Jewish background continue mostly to choose to create outside of Jewish communal life, even as their compositions and performances at times reflect Jewish themes.

Part of the reason for this may be found in the traditional Jewish communal view of music as functional, rather than as worthy of attention in its own right. Music in Jewish life continues to be treated as an enhancement, an aid to set prayer texts, a way to perpetuate text study, a vehicle to enhance celebration. Bach could never have thrived within such an aesthetic. Yes, he composed to meet the demands of his employers and of a liturgical calendar, just as Mozart created works that were sufficiently accessible to keep him in the good graces of the royal court. Yet both composed to affirm a value that I find only infrequently in Jewish musical life, which is the “glory of divinity” — my religious version of the phrase, “art for art’s sake.”

The rabbis of the Talmud embraced a different, wonderful concept called hiddur mitzvah (adorning the mitzvah): that in engaging with ritual we should use the most beautiful objects available. The value of a beautiful melody, as a means of heightening the expressive function of a text, flows from hiddur mitzvah. We are

fortunate in the Reconstructionist movement to have many people who use their gifts in creating music to serve this value.

Still, there is an expressive core to music that is missed by this functional approach and lacking in most of our contemporary synagogue music. Part of the problem is the superficiality of our liturgical lives. People who do not pray with regularity, and congregations whose participants vary from week to week, cannot easily create music of depth. Singing pretty melodies cannot make up for this lack of intensity.

A related part of the problem is that we often settle for the lowest common denominator of aesthetic value in synagogue music, choosing functional simplicity over profundity. What can be easily sung by the group prevails. This was a point made by Judith Kaplan Eisenstein, who bemoaned lack of regard for the rhythms of poetry and for all but the most obvious musical forms. She missed the subtlety of traditional Jewish liturgical music, how its modes reflected the nuances of different times of day and seasons.

Of course, group participation is a positive value. At the same time, religious ritual should not be the same as singing around a campfire. “Singability” often doesn’t translate into musical value or depth.

I know from my own experience as a congregational rabbi that a synagogue can actively explore ways to balance participation and a deeper appreciation for the musical treasures of traditional Jewish musics. Niggun singing offers one way by which we can find an expressive depth that convention congregational singing often doesn’t offer. Another approach is a step child of contemporary improvisatory art that I sometimes call “intuitive ritual improvisation,” for lack of a better term: the creation of vocal sound environments within service settings. Participants improvise individual sounds and notes, sung at each person’s own pace, to capture a textual idea or introduce a period of silence. This is but one example of contemporary musical innovations that could be incorporated into our liturgical lives.

Creativity is a good thing. We should encourage it. We now know that people often learn the most and grow in their identities through non-cognitive means of expression. Our movement is at the forefront of cultivating participation and creative expression in all people. But we do ourselves a disservice if we fail to honor also the high level of commitment and gift that earns the title “artist.”

The Reconstructionist movement must support creative living musicians. Without composers creating what I call “cultivated” music — the use of more formal structures to reflect on our world — we will have far fewer works of depth. There are very few Jewish composers and musicians on this level whose work is heard in Jewish settings, who compose music related to Judaism or Jewish life, who feel welcome in Jewish communities. Most of my friends among the more

talented Jewish composers continue to find funding, commissions and not from Jews but from the Germans, Austrians, and Japanese.

To create bridges between Jewish artists and Jewish life, congregations ca establish artist-in-residencies, hire artists to participate in educational programs., display art shows on premises, invite artists as guest scholars, and sponsor performances of new music and art. We may discover that cultivation of the arts can play a significant a role in Jewish continuity. We cannot know until we have tried.