

Don Harrán

*on a Jewish musical  
Renaissance*

The title of this essay is best framed as a question: Did the Jews have a musical 'renascence' in the Renaissance? It is impossible to answer it without asking a host of others: What is meant by Renaissance? How valid is the term as a chronological or conceptual marker in present-day humanist scholarship? How does it apply to music? Is it relevant to Jewish scholarship – was there in fact a 'Jewish Renaissance'? Does it include music composed by Jews? And even more fundamentally, what is 'Jewish music' and how does it differ, if at all, from 'music composed by Jews'?

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That the literature contains no definitive responses to these admittedly trying questions dispenses me – to my relief – from wrestling with them here. But not completely: in order to continue, I shall have to come up with as many if not clear-cut, at least quick-cut, responses as reveal the assumptions behind the discussion. They are as follows: yes, for the sake of argument, let us agree that there was a Renaissance; and that it denotes some sort of 'renewal'; and that thus construed, it pertains, in certain ways, to Jewish culture in the later fifteenth to early seventeenth centuries; and that one can detect it in sacred and secular 'art music,' by which I mean, in the present case, music for two or more voices composed by Jews in Italy from the later sixteenth century on for use in the synagogue and often private Jewish or non-Jewish settings.

Here is where the semantic problems begin: when written in Hebrew and meant for the synagogue or specifically Jewish celebrations (within the community or separate households), such music might rightly be called 'Jewish art music.' But when written in Italian and meant for nonreligious festivities in the courts, in public, or in the residences of the more affluent Jews, it should probably be called 'art music *by* Jews, though not necessarily *for* Jews.' Either variety is to be distinguished from the traditional types of Jewish song heard in the synagogue for reciting prayers or reading Scriptures. Nothing about them was 'Renaissance' or 'artistic'; rather they perpetuated a medieval oral practice. Nor were the works of art music meant to replace them: their performance in the synagogue was occasional.

We can glean evidence for a Jewish Renaissance in art music from two sources: Hebrew writings on music and the music itself. Their locus – until the later seven-

teenth century – was Northern Italy, particularly Mantua and Venice.

While Christians excelled in the most sophisticated forms of musical composition from the twelfth century on, the Jews were inactive. Excluding a few songs of the thirteenth-century trouvère Mahieu Le Juif and minnesinger Süsskind of Trimberg, both of whom, under pressure, converted to Christianity and hence ‘don’t count,’ there was no art music among the Jews until the Mantuan Davide Sacerdote *ebreo*, by profession a moneylender, published a collection of Italian madrigals in 1575. A few others followed him, most notably Salamone Rossi *ebreo*, who, employed by the Mantuan court mainly as a violinist, published thirteen collections between 1589 and 1628. By all counts, this was an astounding number for a Jewish composer, the more so since his competition at the court was, for many years, the famed Claudio Monteverdi. These collections include madrigals, *madrigaletti*, *canzonette*, instrumental works (dances, *sinfonie*, sonatas), and his Hebrew “Songs of Solomon” (1623), the first known publication of its kind.

Then, all of a sudden, the flurry of Jewish composing activity came to a halt. One may have heard art music in Italian synagogues thereafter, but its composers were usually not Jews. Rather, they were Christians commissioned by Jews to write music for special events. Italy had no Jewish composers to speak of until the nineteenth century.

The evidence for a renewal of art music among Jewish composers inheres in the works themselves. But for the interpretation of these works as connecting with something specifically Renaissance, one must turn to earlier and coeval Hebrew writers. Of the various points they make or imply, several seem to sustain the notion of a Jewish musical rena-

science. It was not the Greeks who invented music, one reads, but the Hebrews. The Greeks attributed its beginnings to Pythagoras, but for the Mantuan rabbi Judah Moscato (d. circa 1594) they erred. Moscato referred, for a proof-text, to Genesis 4:21–22. There we read about Jubal as “the father of everyone holding a lyre [a metonym for string instruments] and an aulos [the same for wind instruments]” and his half-brother Tubalcain as “an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron [brass and percussion instruments].”

Art music may have flourished in the Ancient Temple, but it had long since been forgotten. Samuel Archivolti (d. 1611), a leading rabbi and scholar, lamented its loss and yearned for its return. “Woe for us,” he wrote,

for ever since we wandered from our country because of our sins, the voice of Jacob has diminished, and during our exile songs and dances in Israel [viz. among the Jews] have ceased. What good is it for me to long for them if, among us, there is nobody who knows something about the music of Zion? Who will explain to us its proportions and great charms? Who will guide us in its paths? As it is, it has been put to rest in our sleep and all its muses are abandoned.

Exile and wanderings had taken their toll. “The events of our foreign habitation and restless running,” we are told by Archivolti’s pupil, the Venetian rabbi Leon Modena (d. 1648), “are dispersed over the lands and the vicissitudes of life abroad were enough to make the Hebrews forget all knowledge and lose all intellect.”

It irked the Jews that they fell short of the Christians in the arts and sciences. When David Provenzale (d. after 1572) and his son Abraham (d. 1602) petitioned the Mantuan Jewish authorities

in 1564 to inaugurate a Jewish “university,” they described the Christians “among whom [they] lived as ever increasing in wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and the arts.” The Jews, by contrast, were “isolated, desolate, poor, most unsightly, like lost sheep or a flock without a shepherd.” Education was to remedy the situation. “Why should we be inferior,” the petitioners wondered, “to all other peoples who have scholarly institutions and places fit for instruction in law and the sciences?” (Their request, by the way, was denied.)

The Hebrew writers claimed that the Christians had taken music, once the glory of the Jews, to turn it to their own glory. Immanuel ha-Romi (d. circa 1335) was even blunter: not taken, but stolen. “What will the science of music say to Christians?” he asked in his *Notebooks*, then answered (on music’s behalf): “I was stolen, yes stolen from the land of the Hebrews.” In his own day, he acknowledged the “complete absence of this science from among [his] people.”

Some of the writers discerned a new beginning in the later sixteenth century. But clearly the Jews could not revive something that had disappeared. Instead, they imitated the music of their neighbors. “Their ears picked up a trace of it [their own music] from their neighbors, as the remnant of a city [ancient Jerusalem] in these generations,” Modena observed. Eventually, the Jews became more proficient in writing art music, and there emerged a composer, Salamone Rossi, who was so outstanding that Modena, his greatest supporter, said of him: “He alone is exalted nowadays in this science.” He expanded on Rossi’s achievement in an encomiastic poem (in nineteen distiches, of which I quote three):

- 6 After the glory of the [Hebrew] people  
was dimmed  
completely for many days and many  
years,
- 7 he [Salamone] restored its crown  
[viz. music] to its original state  
as in the days of Levi’s sons [officiating]  
on the platforms [of the Temple].
- 8 He set the words of David’s psalms to  
*musika* [art music]  
with cheerful tunes, then saw to having  
the works printed.

Strangely, the beginnings of Jewish sacred art music were based on Christian models. The Jews appear to have followed these models in their first, hesitant attempts to introduce polyphony into the synagogue in 1604, in Ferrara. Having been trained in the “science of music” by a teacher, some six to eight singers, Modena reports, stood up and performed “songs and praises, hymns, and melodies in honor of the Lord, observing the ordering and relation of the various voices according to the aforementioned science.” Two decades later, Rossi composed his Hebrew sacred songs by adapting them to the procedures of Italian secular music, as employed in his early madrigals. “He worked and labored to add from his secular to his sacred works,” for he did not think it unworthy “to honor the One who favored him [with musical talents] by using that [knowledge of music] with which he had been favored.” So, except for their Hebrew text, Rossi’s sacred songs were outwardly Italian. It goes without saying that his and other Jewish composers’ secular works were Italian to the core.

And yet the Hebrew songs were authentically Hebrew. Why? Because the Jews reappropriated from the Christians what they believed was theirs to start with. In a massive treatise on the An-

cient Temple, Abraham Portaleone (d. 1612) – otherwise renowned as a physician and medical scholar – conceived of its music, which he called “rational song” (*ha-shir ha-mahshavi*), as “a science of varying pitches that, woven together [to form intervals], appear in succession and are so properly calculated in their combination as to offer the ear a pleasant and clear song with a good and sweet melody.” He then proceeded to describe its varying melodies, rhythms, voices, and instruments by reference to contemporary Italian art music.

In practicing music *all’italiana*, the Jews, after having been indolent for centuries, were ‘reviving’ their own music in all of its original, albeit imagined, refinement. Even so, it was something new in their own time. Rossi described his Hebrew songs – which he composed “according to the science of song and art music [*musika*] for three, four, five, six, seven, and eight voices” for the one purpose of “thanking God and singing to His exalted name on all sacred occasions” – as “a new thing in the land.” So did his spokesman Modena, who said that, by publishing them, the composer “is beginning something that [ever since the Ancient Temple] did not exist as such in Israel [viz. among the Jews].” Until then, Jewish song had been practiced in the synagogue. But it was not art music. The big difference between them is that the former was monophonic while the latter was contrived as “rational song” for multiple voices.

Rossi characterized his Hebrew works as ‘orderly’ – “I made them through *se-der*.” *Seder* is literally ‘order,’ though a better translation is ‘counterpoint,’ meaning the coordination of different voice parts to form a harmonious complex. The term was complemented by others, to indicate that the music was not casual in its content, but calculated,

*ergo* ‘rational.’ Moscato, Portaleone, and Modena spoke variously of *yaḥas* (relationship), ‘*erekh* (regulation), *ḥibbur* (composition), *haskamah* (agreement, viz. consonance), *she’ur* (proportion), *derekh* (procedure), or more specifically *darkhei ha-musika* (the conventions of art music).

The implied antonym was ‘disorderly,’ which appears to have been what the Christians thought about synagogue song. One of them remarked on the “extreme discordance in the confusion of so many voices of every variety of ages,” namely, adults down to the smallest children, singing together. Another held that the only thing the Jews get right in intoning their ritual is the “timing and pronouncing of the *Amen*.” Modena was ashamed: “Will we, who were once masters of *musika* [art music] in our prayers and hymns [in times of old], now become a laughingstock to the nations, for them to say that no longer is science in our midst?” By recuperating their ancient patrimony, the Jews would prove that they could compete with their neighbors in composing art music. There would be no reason to ridicule them for ignorance, or to quote Modena’s poem again:

- 13 No more will bitter words about the  
Jews  
be uttered, in a voice of scorn, by the  
haughty.
- 14 They will see that full understanding is  
as much a portion  
of theirs as of others who flaunt it.
- 15 Though weak in [dealing] blows, in  
sciences  
they are a hero, as strong as oaks.

Modena clearly hoped that others would continue this ‘new’ beginning for art music among the Jews. “You should teach them [Rossi’s “Songs”] to your children,” he writes,

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for them to understand the science of music, with the knowledgeable man passing it on to the student, as was said of the Levites [who originally were instructed in music by David]. I am convinced that from the day these works are published, those who learn it [the science of music] will multiply in Israel [viz. among the Jews] in order to sing to the magnificence of our God by using them and others like them.

– the implication being that there *were* “others like them.” So Rossi was not alone in producing these works. There is even evidence that Modena himself might have composed his own. But his prediction of their immediate influence was overly optimistic: it was not until the Emancipation of the Jews in mid-nineteenth-century Italy that the synagogue more regularly incorporated new works of polyphonic song in its prayer services.

Reading the language of the commentators, and weighing it against the practical remains, one senses that art music composed by Jews enjoyed a Renaissance (of sorts), and was perceived as a Renaissance (of sorts), in early modern Italy. As the Old Testament foreshadowed the New, so ancient Hebrew music was typologized by Hebrew writers as the *fons et origo* of Christian music. The Jews had no other way to revive their sonic heritage than to work back through Christian examples to what they considered rightfully theirs in its historical primacy and admirably theirs in its artistic distinction. By identifying with their past, they found the courage to compose art music in the present. But not for long: a new Dark Age of increasing socioeconomic repression was soon to descend upon them, only to obliterate any signs of renewal.