

Great Figures in Jewish Music: Cantor Salomon Sulzer

Salomon Sulzer almost drowned in a childhood swimming accident. As the boy's life was hanging in the balance, his mother vowed that if he would be saved, she would devote his life to a sacred career. That little accident was to have quite an impact on the future of Jewish liturgical music! Salomon was resuscitated, and subsequently received extensive training in the cantorial art. The lad soon proved himself more than equal to the task. By the time he reached age of bar mitzvah, this young prodigy was already known as the finest cantor in his native Hohenems. Moreover, after acquiring a conservatory education in composition and singing, Sulzer became the first musician in modern times to create a synagogue liturgy of the highest aesthetic standard by combining the cantorial heritage with forms and performance techniques of modern European music.

In 1827, the Jewish community of Vienna was searching for a new cantor: someone knowledgeable in Jewish music, yet sophisticated enough to match their own cosmopolitan tastes. The 23-year-old Sulzer was just the man Vienna was looking for.

At the Seitenstettengasse Temple, Cantor Sulzer tried to find the "middle road"---a path that would preserve the essential elements of Jewish musical traditions, but clothe them in modern Austrian garb; that would please the older generation, and at the same time provide a idiom to which the younger acculturated Jews could relate.

People flocked from all over Europe to hear the new cantor and his choir. And not only Jewish worshippers came to the synagogue; some of the most sophisticated gentile musicians found their way to the Seitenstettengasse Temple. Franz Liszt, the famous pianist and composer, had this to say in his diary:

In Vienna we visited the famous tenor Sulzer, who served in the capacity of precentor in the synagogue, and whose reputation is so outstanding. For moments we could penetrate into his real soul and recognize the secret doctrines of the fathers.... Seldom were we so stirred by emotion as on that evening, so shaken that our soul was entirely given to meditation and to participation in the service.[1]

In 1866 the great music critic Eduard Hanslick wrote in the *Neue Freie Presse*:

[Sulzer] is one of the most popular figures of Vienna.... Even today no foreign musician leaves Vienna without having listened to the celebrated cantor. His performance, from the slightest breath to the most powerful of tones, combines the charm of the exotic with the persuasiveness of a glowing faith.[2]

Joseph Mainzer, a Catholic composer, wrote:

The synagogue was the only place where a stranger could find, artistically speaking, a source of enjoyment that was as solid as it was dignified. Never, except for the Sistine Chapel, has art given me higher joy than in the synagogue. In seven months I did not miss a single service. One has to attend no more than once, however, in order to find oneself instantly freed, as if by some sudden reaction, of all the odious prejudices against the Jews instilled in us with baptism in early childhood.[3]

And the Englishwoman Frances Trollope wrote:

There is in truth so wild and strange a harmony in the songs of Israel as performed in the synagogue in this city, that it would be difficult to render full justice to the splendid excellence of the performance, without falling into the language of enthusiasm.... The volume of vocal sound exceeds anything of the kind I have ever heard; and being unaccompanied by any instrument, it produces an effect equally singular and delightful.[4]

But Sulzer's fame today rests not so much on his singing as on his compositions. Some of Sulzer's choral melodies became so popular that the congregation began to sing along---a practice that the great cantor discouraged at every turn.

But the melodies that Sulzer composed for *VaY'hi BiNesoa Ho-Oron*, *Yehalelu Es Shem*, and *Shema Yisroel* are heard in nearly every Ashkenazic synagogue today.

Sulzer's compositions, as well as those which he commissioned from Franz Schubert and several other great Viennese musicians---together with his transcriptions and arrangements of ancient traditional Jewish melodies---all these works were brought together and published between 1839 and 1865 in the two volumes of his magnum opus, *Schir Zion*.

Hanslick wrote, "Sulzer's *Schir Zion* lies open before me. The chants have the stamp of genuine Jewish-oriental music. It was Sulzer who restored order, dignity and lofty aesthetic form in the musical liturgy of Judaism."

In our own time, Sulzer is again receiving recognition from the general musical community. Volume 134 in the scholarly series, *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in der Österreich* (Monuments of Austrian Music), published in 1983, is devoted to Sulzer's synagogue music. And, ten years ago, the Austrian government issued a stamp bearing a portrait of Cantor Sulzer and the words, "100 Todestag von Salomon Sulzer, 1804--1890, Republik Österreich, 1990."

The music of Salomon Sulzer can be heard on Zamir's CD [The Majesty of Holiness](#)

1. Franz Liszt, *Les Bohémiens et leur musique*, in Sam Morgenstern, *Composers on Music* (New York: 1956), p. 163.
 2. Eduard Hanslick, "Salomon Sulzer," *Die Neue Freie Presse* 551 (Vienna, 1866).
 3. Joseph Mainzer, "Vienna et la Synagogue Juive pendant les années 1826, 1827 et 1828," *Gazette Musicale de Paris* 1 (1834) p. 126.
 4. Frances Trollope, *Vienna and the Austrians*, (London: 1838) Vol. 1, p.373.
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