



Salamone Rossi, the Mystery Man of Jewish Art Music Composers

Prof. Don Harrán

This article appeared in the Spring 2003 issue of [Notes from Zamir](#).

Salamone Rossi needs no introduction. He occupies a special place in Western and, more particularly, Jewish music history as the earliest outstanding Jewish composer to work in the European art music tradition. Active at the court of Mantua in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Rossi had no predecessors of comparable celebrity among Jewish musicians in the fifteen hundred or more years that separate him from the legendary "sweet psalmist of Israel" King David; and, as a Jewish composer of art music for multiple voices and instruments, including a premier collection of Hebrew "songs," he remains unchallenged by other Jews, in both the quantity and the quality of his works, until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Yet why the "mystery man"? Because Rossi's life and works read as a halting account of certainties and obscurities. Large gray areas of the unknown surround and shadow the fragmentary information on Rossi contained in court records and the archives of the Mantuan Jewish community or conjectured from collateral evidence. I'll review the information as a series of conclusive and inconclusive propositions. The conclusive ones are easily recognized from their declarative formulation while the inconclusive ones have their own telltale signs, among them verbs in the subjunctive (*may, might*) or the conditional (*would, could*), or qualifying adjectives or adverbs (*presumable, presumably*), or sentences beginning with a restrictive conjunction (*but, yet*) or ending with an interrogation point.

Rossi *may* have been born around 1570, *probably* in Mantua; he is *assumed* to have died around 1628, in Mantua or *possibly* in Venice. Why 1570? Because the composer *may* have alluded to his date of birth in certain numerical references in his first publication. Why Mantua? Because, *as far as known*, there is no evidence to the contrary. Why Venice? *Perhaps* because Rossi signed his last collection with the inscription "From Venice, 3 January 1628," after which date he disappears from the literature. In short, the years and places at the extremities of his biography are indeterminate. Except for the name of his father (Bonaiuto, or in Hebrew Azariah, not to be confused, by the way, with the eminent sixteenth-century historian Azariah de' Rossi) and piecemeal information on a sister (Europa) and brother (Emanuele, or in Hebrew Menahem), we know nothing about his family and relations. *One wonders*: was he married? did he have children? who are the heirs to whom he refers in the copyright notice appended to his Hebrew collection?

Rossi served the Mantuan court from *at least* 1589 until 1622, *if not* 1628, to judge from his appearance on three records of court payments to musicians over the period 1589–1622. But why the upward extension to 1628? Because it is *likely* that Rossi continued serving the reigning dukes until the *presumed* time of his death. *Yet* the salary listings for musicians at the court are few and far apart, indeed between those for 1592 and 1622 no others have been preserved; so *who knows* whether the service was consecutive or interrupted? He *seems* to have been active at the court as a violinist, a conductor of one or more instrumental ensembles, and a composer; or so one *might infer* from the kinds of works he wrote and various references to him, in the archives, in one or another of these capacities.

Rossi *appears* to have been active in the Mantuan Jewish theater, for the productions of which he *probably* supervised the musical portions variously presented at beginnings and ends of comedies or between their acts. *But* all one has to go on for his affiliation with the Jewish theatrical troupe are the lists of participants, with his name inscribed on them, for a few productions. Since the Jews were expected to act, sing, and play instruments in these comedies, it *may be assumed* that their leading musician, Salamone Rossi, contributed his share by writing vocal and instrumental works, rehearsing

them, and, together with others, playing or *perhaps* even singing them. *Yet* nothing remains of his compositions for the Jewish productions. Are they hidden away in his published collections? Were they prepared as manuscript copies that since have perished?

Rossi provided music for productions of the non-Jewish theater, for instance, a vocal-instrumental *balletto* for the sacred play *La Maddalena*, staged in 1617 as part of the celebrations for Duke Ferdinando's marriage to Caterina de' Medici. It *may be assumed* that his contribution to these productions was more extensive than is known. *Why?* Because the court sponsored a sizeable number of theatrical entertainments for which Rossi's and his fellow musicians' services *would* have been needed to meet the heavy demand for vocal or instrumental music and its performance.

Rossi *seems*, or so one *might presume* from certain remarks in the archives, to have directed one or *possibly* two instrumental ensembles at the Mantuan court. At some stage, he even formed his own ensemble, or *concerto*, thus designated, of two or more instruments and *perhaps* voices, with which he appeared at the Mantuan and occasionally other courts and in private houses of the nobility. The dedications to his instrumental collections as well as their contents lead one to various *suppositions* about this activity, the details of which are still to be corroborated by written evidence.

Rossi *may be assumed* to have actively participated in the life of the Mantuan Jewish community, preparing music for use in the synagogue and for private celebrations. *Yet* all we have to go on for this postulation is the presence of his Hebrew music collection and the references, in its elaborate prefatory material, to music making among the Jews. His sponsor in the Jewish community, and the one who *may* to a certain degree have defrayed the expenses of this and his other publications, was the loan banker Moses Sullam. *But* the nature of his relations with his benefactor and the extent to which he received his financial, if not moral support remain to be explained.

Rossi composed 313 or more works, of which 307 are preserved in thirteen collections printed between 1589 and 1628. Some of the collections were issued in reprints or later editions, making a total of twenty-five (!) publications. *Whether* there were more works than those printed cannot be determined: Rossi does, for example, refer, rather enticingly, to having prepared a considerable number of Hebrew songs, from which he selected the ones to be published. *But* where are the ones he omitted?

In his thirteen collections Rossi assembled three kinds of compositions:

(1) Italian vocal works, mainly madrigals for five or, in one collection, four voices, yet sometimes lighter types (*madrigaletti, canzonette*) for two or three. Many of them were composed to verses by leading contemporary poets (Battista Guarini, Gabriello Chiabrera, Ottavio Rinuccini, Giovan Battista Marino). They form eight collections, with, altogether, 150 items. *But* what was the order of their composition (as distinct from their publication)? On musical grounds *it seems*, for example, that he wrote his four-voice madrigals published in 1614 as early as 1601–3, *yet* the assumption remains to be demonstrated. *Why* did Rossi choose the poems he did? *How* does one explain the anomaly of his predilection for the manneristic verses of Marino and their classicistic musical elaboration at his hands?

(2) Instrumental works, largely in three parts (two violins and a *chitarrone*, or bass lute), yet sometimes in four or five; in all, 130 items published in four collections. They comprise dances (*gagliarde, correnti, brandi*), executed alone or *possibly* in pairs or larger groupings; relatively short *sinfonie* that *may* have introduced vocal or other instrumental compositions; and lengthy, autonomous *sonate*. It is still *unclear*, though, how the dances were assembled into aggregate forms or when and why the short *sinfonie* were joined to other pieces. *One wonders* how much of the writing in the often technically demanding sonatas reflects Salamone Rossi's own abilities and practices as a virtuoso string player and whether, in performance, he or his partners abided by what he notated or varied it by luxuriant ornamentation.

(3) Hebrew works, thirty-three in all, for three to eight voices, in a single collection, entitled the "Songs of Solomon" (1623). To judge from the ample introductory comments of the composer and others to the collection, they were meant to be performed in the synagogue on festivals and special Sabbaths and, where suitable, in confraternities or for private and communal events. *Yet* when did the idea for the collection originate? Who initiated it, the composer, the sponsor, his rabbi friend Leon Modena? *How* did the congregation react to these new pieces of art music, so different from the traditional chants of the prayer services: with reticence? indifference? enthusiasm? hostility? What kind of discussions or arguments or altercations were there, if at all, for or against the "Songs"? How were the

reactionaries placated? Why did the composer choose the prayers and *piyyutim* he did? On what level do the "Songs of Solomon" connect with the "Song of Songs," to which the composer facetiously refers as a paradigm: metaphorically, metaphysically? Could there be hidden prayer melodies lurking behind the counterpoint of his polyphonic works? *One wonders* how the composer related to the fabled music in the Ancient Temple: did he conceive himself as a new David or Solomon, renewing its practice, as he was described in his collection ("he restored the crown [of song] to its original state in the days of the Levites")?

Rossi collaborated, in his Hebrew works, with the renowned Venetian rabbi and cantor Leon Modena: it was Modena who, on his own testimony, strengthened and supported the composer in their preparation and who oversaw their printing and undertook their proofreading. *Yet* what were the realities of this collaboration: when did the two first meet and discuss ideas and procedures for the pioneering collection? How did Modena shape Rossi's textual and musical conceptions? What were the different stages in the elaboration of the plan, from inception to realization?

Rossi dedicated his collections to various "patrons" in Mantua (Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga; his son Prince Vincenzo, later to become Duke Vincenzo II; and other members of the Gonzaga family) and its Jewish community (Moses Sullam), Mirandola (Prince Alessandro Pico), and Modena (Duke Cesare d'Este and his son Prince Alfonso). *Yet* we know almost nothing about the composer's relations with these notables. As patrons, what in fact did they do? Commission the collections or, if not commission them, then at least reward the composer for his efforts? Why is it that Rossi dedicated no works to Duke Francesco or Duke Ferdinando? Was it because unlike the earlier Duke Vincenzo, who *appears* to have appreciated and encouraged his Jewish musician, or so Rossi leads us to believe from his flattering words of dedication to him, they, on the other hand, remained distant? or evinced hostility? Francesco, for example, was known as a Jew-hater; even the pope said so.

Rossi traveled to the court of Mirandola at least once. Visits to other courts, including Modena and *possibly* Vienna, may be *conjectured*: Modena, on the basis of Rossi's collections dedicated to its rulers; Vienna, on the basis of his "Sonata detta la Viena" (was Rossi at the Hapsburg court to participate in the festivities for the marriage, in 1622, of Eleonora Gonzaga, daughter of Duke Vincenzo I, and Emperor Ferdinand II?). The composer was in Venice on three different occasions, *if not* others, to supervise the printing of his collections and *possibly* to try out his Hebrew works, in various synagogues, before and after their publication. There he *would* have met with Leon Modena and members of the Venetian Jewish community, including the poet and literary patroness Sara Copio Sullam, whose husband Jacob was, moreover, the son of Rossi's protector Moses Sullam. *But* did he?

Rossi's life and works are riddled with uncertainties. They raise more questions than one could possibly answer by reference to the existing documentation. But the biggest question to challenge the imagination and beg an explanation is: how did it happen that, almost "out of the blue," there appeared a fully-formed Jewish musician who won the favor of the court rulers as both an instrumentalist and a composer and who, building on this favor, produced an incredibly large repertory of over three hundred compositions printed in a total of thirteen collections? True, there were various attempts, from the early seventeenth century on, to introduce art music into the synagogue. But no remnants of these earlier works have survived nor do we know their composers' names. True, again, there were a few other Jewish composers at the time (David Sacerdote, David Civita, Allegro Porto). But their works—all in Italian and secular in character—are sparse and fragmentary. Rossi burst onto the scene as if a comet in the heavens, leaving a long and luminous trail of compositions that, all at once, renewed art music of Jewish authorship after centuries of its neglect: with the destruction of the Second Temple and the Exile and Dispersion, the Jews forgot their musical heritage, or so Leon Modena argued. Yet no sooner did the "renaissance" of Jewish art music composition begin than it abruptly ended. There were some occasional works to Hebrew texts from the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but their composers were usually Christians under commission to prepare them for special occasions in the community. Where are the Jewish composers, though? How is that none of any stature emerged until the Emancipation? Jacques Halévy, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Jacques Offenbach, Salomon Sulzer, the Jewish-born Mendelssohn and Mahler who eventually converted to Christianity, or the Jewish-born Arnold Schönberg who converted and then returned to Judaism, Ernest Bloch, Leonard Bernstein, Darius Milhaud: these and others are Rossi's real, lawful successors. But, apart from Sulzer, not one of them produced a repertory of Hebrew works as extensive and musically exceptional as Rossi's "Songs of Solomon." In his person and music Rossi is shrouded in as much mystery today as in his own time. Maybe we will have to wait, for its elucidation, "until the Rock," no less mysteriously, "renews His Temple by restoring speech in song [*shir*] to the faithful" (from a dedicatory poem in the "Songs of Solomon").

Don Harrán is Artur Rubinstein Professor of Musicology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He has published

widely in professional journals and is the author and editor of numerous volumes, including a monograph on Salamone Rossi, *Jewish Musician in Late Renaissance Mantua* (Oxford University Press, 1999) and an edition of Rossi's complete works (American Institute of Musicology, volumes 1–12, with his instrumental and Italian vocal compositions, 1995, and, recently published, volumes 13a–b, with his Hebrew "Songs of Solomon," 2003).



Lufthansa

[Lufthansa is the official airline of the On Wings of Song Heritage Mission to Italy and the sponsor of our raffle.](#)



Zamir is funded in part by a grant from the [Massachusetts Cultural Council](#), a state agency which also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Zamir's management can be emailed at manager@zamir.org

Zamir's Artistic Director, Joshua Jacobson, can be emailed at conductor@zamir.org.

Comments or questions about our website can be emailed to webmaster@zamir.org.