



Notes from Zamir

Fall 1997

A SENSE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

Until recently, the study of music consisted of the historical and theoretical analysis of masterworks that were produced by a few great European composers. But over the past hundred years the focus has broadened. Now all kinds of musics are open for study. And the parameters for analysis now include the important issue of how people "use" music.

Think about the many functions of music in your life. Your day is filled with music: the clock radio that wakes you up, the television commercial jingles, the cassette in your car that helps ease your commute to work, the Muzak in the elevator, the jazzercise tape, the relaxation tape, the movie soundtrack, the concert experience, chanting in the synagogue, practicing the piano, etc. Ethnomusicologists have brought to our attention yet another function of music. People use music as a means of asserting their ethnic identity in the face of a cultural threat. In Iran of the 1970s, for example, music from Europe and American was preferred by the modernized, Westernized sector of society. At the same time, those who treasured the traditional values of that society preferred Iranian classical music, which came to symbolize national roots and continuity.

Similarly, while at times Native Americans may choose to emulate Euro- Americans or African-Americans and listen to their music, at other times they choose to express their tribal identity by listening to, singing and/or dancing to their own traditional music. The Amish in various locations in North America hold on to their musical customs as zealously as they maintain their unique modes of dress, speech and society. Many sansei (third generation Japanese-Americans), in their search for cultural identity, have turned to music as an expression of ethnic pride. In the past two decades numerous taiko drumming ensembles have been formed from New York to Los Angeles. In other cases, a subculture uses music as a memory trigger, a means of nostalgically returning to the "good old days" in the "old country." This phenomenon can be seen in nineteenth-century Irish American songs such as "The Harp That Once Thro' Tara's Halls."¹

For the past two thousand years, scattered across the globe, Jews have been a minority culture. Like the Iranians, Amish, Irish-Americans, Plains Indians and Japanese-American mentioned above, Jews have used music to preserve a sense of cultural identity, as a hedge against disappearing into the surrounding majority and as a reminder of their national roots in ancient Israel.

One hundred years ago Jews in Eastern Europe discovered the use of choral singing as a means to express their cultural identity through music and through fellowship. For the members of the first Zamir Chorale, founded in Lodz, Poland in 1899, music was a means of furthering their political agenda: expressing pride in

their ethnicity. A second branch of Zamir was founded in Warsaw in 1903. Its conductor, Leo Low, composed a setting of lyrics by the Hebrew poet Jacob Fichman. Defining its agenda, this song became a popular anthem for the Zamir Chorales:

*Sing, comrades, sing!
With song we will rouse the people,
and we will rouse the people's hearts,
and in their hearts we will rouse an exalted sentiment.
Then the people will rise and be enlightened,
and their lives will be changed.
Comrades, let us sing:
Long life to Zamir!*

Echoing the words of the ancient Hebrew prophets, these lyrics espouse the idea that the time has come for the nation to awaken from its slumber. To this ancient sentiment was added a new twist: Music is the powerful force that will awaken the people.

Today the Zamir Chorale of Boston carries on this tradition. We use music not only to stimulate aesthetic sensibilities, but also as an educational tool - a means of exploring the colorful and varied cultures that Jews have created over the past two thousand years, and also as a musical banner of our ethnic pride. Come to a concert soon and share the excitement!

* For further information on this phenomenon: Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Charles Hamm, Bruno Nettl and Ronald Byrnside, *Contemporary Music and Music Cultures* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975) and Susan Asai, "Transformations of Tradition: Three Generations of Japanese American Music Making" (*The Musical Quarterly*, Fall, 1995, pp. 429-453).

MEET THE MANAGER (AGAIN)

Greetings. I'm Sophia Bilides (mbee-LEE-thees), Zamir's new Executive Director, replacing Pamela Holmes, who recently joined her fiance in Ohio. We wish her well on her engagement, and appreciate her competence, hard work, and enthusiasm. In contrast to her sparkling youth, I'm 43, a Greek-Italian second-generation American born and raised in Connecticut.

My musical influences included Greek songs from my father's Asia Minor community, Italian songs from my mother's Neapolitan family, rhythm and blues from my African-American neighborhood, Broadway musicals and cabaret, the classical song repertoire, and American and Balkan folk music. After receiving a degree in Voice and Music Education from New England Conservatory, I ultimately focused on performing Greek and American cabaret music, both genres small enough to ensure that I'd never make a living at it - but what great songs! I perform at concert halls, clubs, and festivals nationwide, and I have one CD, *Greek Legacy*, to my name.

For the past twenty years I made my home in western Massachusetts farm country, in two beautiful towns, Deerfield and Montague. My work there included being Executive Director of the Pioneer Valley Folklore Society, which presented public concerts and school programs. I was also the producer and host of *Valley Folk*, a radio program of international folk music. And for seven years, my husband Tom Babbin and I had

a Northampton CD store specializing in classical, jazz, and ethnic music.

Finally admitting that the area's scenery was not going to pay the bills, we looked elsewhere for employment, and Tom was eventually hired by Boston College as a Computer Consultant (the usual career move for a musicologist). I was lucky enough to be taken in by Zamir, and so here we are, trying to get used to Boston drivers and the absence of dairy cows. I look forward to helping Zamir continue on its impressive professional path, and my dog Bianca thanks Zamir for keeping her in kibble.

THE ALUMNI COLUMN

Sara Geller is currently serving as Cantor at Temple Beth El in Swampscott, Massachusetts. Sara, along with her husband Leon and their daughters, Ruth and Becky, invite Zamir alumni and friends to visit and/or pray with them! This column has always been a vehicle to report on the joyous events in the lives of our alumni, so it is with much sadness that I share the news of the death of one of our former singers.

Martha Sue Hoffman, a treasured member of the Zamir Chorale of Boston for many years, passed away on June 21st following a long bout with cancer. She joined the chorus in its early years when she was a student at Boston University. Martha Sue loved to sing, and she loved Zamir. She was outgoing and always had a smile on her face. People were drawn to her and she was drawn to people. It made sense to create a position on the Zamir Board just for her, and so Martha Sue became the Personnel Liaison. If there was dissatisfaction within the chorus for any reason, we would seek out Martha Sue. In her calm and soothing manner, things would be smoothed over. When she stood up to make announcements during rehearsal, the entire chorus would chant, "Martha Sue, we love you! Martha Sue, we love you!" We did love her - and when she left the chorus, the position of Personnel Liaison was officially retired.

On Saturday, February 28th at 8:30 pm, the Zamir Chorale will perform at Temple Torat Yisrael in Cranston, Rhode Island. The evening's program will be a celebration of life, in memory of Martha Sue Hoffman. We invite everyone who knew and loved Martha Sue to be present that evening as we honor her memory.

BORN:

- To Robin (Koplow) and Lawton Cooper, a daughter, Shulamit Rena, May 4, 1997

MAZEL TOV TO:

- Caryl Diengott on her marriage to Evan Pressman
- Emily Lander on her marriage to Scott Worobey
- Shira Lewin on her new position as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Economics at Iowa State University
- Debbie Sussman on being honored at the Hebrew College and Prozdor Alumni Association Banquet for her achievements as Director of Camp Yavneh
- Alan Teperow on being honored for 15 years of service as Executive Director of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts

Please keep in touch! We want to hear about milestones in your lives. You can reach me c/o Zamir's

address, or by email (susancarp@juno.com). -Susan Carp-Nesson, Alumni Chair

Your gift helps us...

foster a love for the Jewish heritage,
promote awareness of Jewish culture,
& keep alive a great musical tradition!

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Many thanks to...

Steven and Eileen Beckhardt, whose generous gift helped establish Zamir's new full-time Executive Director position.

David and Clare Weinstein and **Lawrence and Jill Sandberg**, whose generous contributions made possible Zamir's reissue of *The Majesty of Holiness*.



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Zamir's Executive Director can be emailed at execdir@zamir.org

Zamir's Artistic Director, Joshua Jacobson, can be emailed at jrj@neu.edu.

This page maintained by [Andrew Greene](#).