

You Don't Have to Be Jewish To...

Joshua Jacobson, Artistic Director

For the past few decades, I have been teaching workshops on Jewish Music at conventions of the American Choral Directors Association. The ACDA is an organization that represents some 20,000 choral directors across the United States: conductors of choirs in public and private schools, colleges and conservatories, professional choirs, community choirs and church choirs. The conventions feature inspiring performances, stimulating speeches, and informative workshops.

Increasingly, America's choral directors are interested in multiculturalism, but that interest is sparked by a variety of incentives. For years, the staple of the choral repertoire has been settings by great composers of texts from the Christian liturgies: masses, requiems, passions, cantatas, anthems and motets. In recent years the hegemony of this repertoire has come under fire. African-Americans and Asian-Americans have questioned the exclusivity of music from the European traditions. Jews and Moslems have expressed concern about the effect on their children of constant exposure to Christian liturgy. So conductors today are seeking the "politically correct" path, attempting to be as inclusive as possible. Occasionally the results are disastrous.

In some school systems conductors have been told to avoid liturgical music altogether! This misguided attempt at political correctness ends up censoring some of Western civilization's greatest works of art. Is singing Mozart's Requiem a theological experience or an aesthetic experience? What about going to a museum to see Raphael's Madonna and Child? How deeply does a performer become enveloped in his or her script? Most actors leave their characters behind when they remove their costumes and make-up. Isn't it the same for singers? Now, I would make a distinction between singing Handel's Messiah and singing Christmas carols. One is primarily an artistic experience, the other primarily a religious/social experience.

Other school conductors take a different path---they attempt to balance their programming. The "December dilemma" is solved by adding some Chanukkah music to a Christmas concert. Another disaster! Some of the greatest music has been inspired by themes of the Christmas season. Chanukkah, by contrast, is a minor holiday. But music publishers, sensing a market, have flooded us with a deluge of inane dreidel songs. The contrast of the highest art of one religion and the worst kitsch of the other is, frankly, embarrassing.

That's where Zamir comes in. Through workshops and performances at ACDA conventions we have made thousands of conductors aware of what they had thought was an oxymoron—good Jewish choral music. Conductors all across America are realizing that Jewish music isn't just for December anymore. Multicultural programming is now motivated by enthusiasm, rather than guilt.

At the Eastern Division ACDA conference in Baltimore this past February, I had the privilege of introducing my colleagues to the beautiful synagogue music of Salamone Rossi, a Jewish composer of late Renaissance Italy. And in March, Zamir traveled with me to the North Central Division ACDA conference in Madison, Wisconsin, to introduce Midwestern conductors to the riches and variety of Jewish music.

Perhaps the greatest measure of our success is when we see Zamir's repertoire appearing on the programs of choirs all across America: school choirs, conservatory choirs, community choruses, even church choirs! We can rejoice in the fact that Jewish choral music is no longer the exclusive domain of Jewish choirs.

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