

Program Notes – Zamir Goes Baroque

In this program we explore compositions by and for the sophisticated Jewish communities of Venice, Mantua, Amsterdam and Comtat Venaissin in the 17th and 18th centuries.

We begin with music from the path-breaking collection of synagogue motets by Salamone Rossi Hebreo. Rossi was employed as a violinist and composer at the ducal court of the Gonzaga family in Mantua. For the Gonzagas he wrote secular music, which we will hear shortly. But Rossi's Rabbi, Leon Modena encouraged him to apply his skills to the music of the synagogue.

From the time I first became his close friend, I too urged him strongly with many words of persuasion until we were successful. Thanks to the Creator, that which I hoped for has been realized and he has agreed to fulfill his pledge and bring his music to print as he had promised.

And in 1622 Rossi's synagogue music was published in Venice. The title page reads (translated from the Hebrew):

Bass/ The Songs/ of Solomon/ Psalms, songs and hymns of praise that/ have been composed according to the science of music/ for three, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 voices/ by the honored master Salamone Rossi, may his Rock keep him and save him/ a resident of the holy congregation of Mantua/ to give thanks to the Lord, and to sing His most exalted name on all/ sacred occasions. A new thing/ in the land./ Here in Venice, 1622/ at the command of their Lordships/ Pietro and Lorenzo Bragadini/ in the house of Giovanni Calleoni/ [in Italian:] By the distinguished Lords/ Pietro and Lorenzo Bragadini.

But this was not without controversy. Rabbi Modena tells us that one Sabbath, "a man stood up to drive them out of the synagogue, saying that it is not proper to do this, for rejoicing is forbidden, and song is forbidden, and prayers set to artful music have been forbidden since the Temple was destroyed."

But the rabbi quickly rose to his friend's defense:

I do not see how anyone with a brain in his skull could cast any doubt on the propriety of praising God in song in the synagogue on special Sabbaths and on festivals. ... The cantor is urged to intone his prayers in a pleasant voice. If he were able to make his one voice sound like ten singers, would

this not be desirable? ... and if it happens that they harmonize well with him, should this be considered a sin?

Case closed! Now Rossi understood that some parts of the liturgy would be chanted in the traditional manner by the cantor and the congregation. So next we will hear the *kedushah* as it may have sounded, sung in part by the choir and in part by the cantor and in part by the congregation.

Kedushah

Rossi's synagogue choir consisted of between 3 and 8 men. Only. And instruments were used only when this music would be performed outside of the synagogue.

After each section of the kaddish the audience became the "congregation" and chanted "amen."

Kaddish

Sinfonia in F

Adon Olam

Rossi's day job was writing music for his patron Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga. His seven books of madrigals and his collection of canzonets are among the most beautiful and, for his time, the most modern. We will hear now three of these beautiful love songs.

Cor mio

I bei ligustri

Dir mi che piu non ardo

Rossi also supplied his patron with music for dancing. We will hear two of his dances.

But he also composed and performed numerous pieces in the new Baroque trio-sonata style. And Rossi's collection of 1613 was the first time trio sonatas had been published.

Sonata in Dialogo

Gaillarde Zambalina

Gaillarde La Massara

On February 6, 1617 Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga married Caterina de' Medici. For the wedding celebrations, the musicians at the Gonzaga court collaborated on music for a play by Giovanni Battista Andrei, called *La Maddalena*. Rossi's contribution was this little comic intermezzo. It was danced by La Maddalena's servants, some sprinkling water on the flowerpots and others sweeping the floor with their brooms.

Spazziam

The most popular institutions in seventeenth century Venice were the confraternities, *scuole grandi*. Like modern-day Rotary Clubs, these were institutions open to any citizen, whose primary purpose was to do charitable work, such as distribution of food and clothing to the poor, assisting with dowries, the burial of paupers, and the supervision of hospitals. But, as with many such organizations, they also enjoyed pomp and ceremony, and would frequently stage festive parades.

The Jews of Venice had a confraternity called *Shomerim LaBoker* (The Watchmen of the Dawn). And every year on *Hoshana Rabba* (the seventh day of *Sukkot*), they would rise early for midnight prayers and then mount their own parade. Some time around 1680 the members of *Shomerim LaBoker* commissioned the composer, Carlo Grossi, to write a little cantata describing their charitable activities and their prayer vigil. This cantata is structured as a dialogue between the members of *Shomerim LaBoker* and an anonymous man who asks them about their activities.

Cantata ebraica

In 1774 the Jewish community of Amsterdam celebrated Purim with a new composition, a musical setting of the story of Esther in the style of a Baroque oratorio. The Hebrew text (libretto) was written by the Italian rabbi Jacob Raphael Saraval. In fact, it was basically a translation into Hebrew of the libretto of Handel's oratorio *Esther*, written six decades earlier. The music was entrusted to the composer Cristiano Giuseppe Lidarti, born in Vienna, but living at the time in Italy. Lidarti was not Jewish but he had already composed several settings of Hebrew texts for the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. The musical score of this oratorio was lost and forgotten for 223 years, until it was discovered in 1997 by the Israeli musicologist Israel Adler.

We will perform just a few excerpts.

First we hear a Persian Jew praying that God will watch over Esther, now that she is a queen in the palace of Ahashverosh.

**Domu Lakhem
Mal'akhim**

Haman has hatched his plot to plunder and murder the Jews of Persia.
Act One ends with this lament.

Bet yisrael sifdu

The second act opens on a more hopeful note. The chorus sings of their confidence that justice will prevail and that evildoers will ultimately be punished.

Anshey Resha

Well, you know the story. Queen Esther bravely approached the King and explained that his trusted Haman was a corrupt and evil scoundrel. Haman's plot was foiled. The Jews of Persia were saved. In the jubilant finale, the people sing a song of thanksgiving to God.

**Mi-yad Khazak
Pitskhu Rina
Hetivu Bitru'a Nagen
Ki Hu La-khosim Bo Magen
Hodu Ha-arets**

Between the fourteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the region in southern France known as Comtat Venaissin was a papal territory. For Jews, this area became a flourishing community.

Sometime between 1680 and 1700, a Jewish notable in one of these communities was anticipating the birth of a child which he clearly hoped would be a son. Wishing to celebrate this occasion with the pomp befitting his wealthy status, he commissioned a local composer to write a cantata which would be performed on the eighth day, on the occasion of the *brit milah*.

Like other cantatas from the early French Baroque, it is divided into choral movements, arias, and instrumental preludes and dances.

Now more than 300 years later we join the festivities and celebrate the birth of this baby, whoever he was.

Canticum Hebraicum