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The Liturgical Music Catastrophe

and its Consequences for Jews and Christians

by David P. Goldman

An irony of 20th century history is that the intellectual giants of 20th century Judaism met in Germany in the 1920s. The Reform leader Leo Baeck, the future Conservative leader Abraham J. Heschel, and the sage of Modern Orthodoxy Joseph Soloveitchik all studied in Berlin, along with the great theologian Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929). Rosenzweig, who became Orthodox in practice, does not fit easily into either the Orthodox or Conservative camp. The destruction of German Jewry was a mutual catastrophe for Jews and Germans. The Germans have jettisoned their own high culture in a paroxysm of self-disgust, to the point that young Germans cannot quote a single line of Goethe's. The Jews have trouble reading their own 20th-century sages, whose philosophical training assisted their fresh and vibrant formulation of Jewish theological principles. When Heschel speaks of event versus process and sacred time versus sacred space, and Rosenzweig contrasts the eternal moment with the eternal journey, today's Jewish readers hear a disused and forbidding dialect. I shall argue that it is impossible to make sense of today's debate over liturgical music without these concepts. Getting this issue wrong may have catastrophic consequences.>/p>

Pope John Paul II has agreed to host a rock concert May 1 including such luminaries as Lou Reed of the Velvet Underground. A news account reports, "His 1972 smash hit, 'Walk on the Wild Side,' had to be censored on radio stations because of its graphic lyrics, which talked of the transvestite lifestyle. The Brooklyn-born artist – who has talked of shooting up heroin, dropping acid, smoking grass and downing speed – said, 'To attain equilibrium you need to take certain drugs. They don't get you high, even, they just get you normal.'"¹

Back in the 1980s, Josef Cardinal Ratzinger campaigned against rock music as an instrument of Satan. Cardinal Ratzinger is a classically-trained musician, from a musical family (his brother is a respected choral conductor). For the Vatican to embrace not only rock music but some of the most grotesque rock musicians represents quite a turnaround.

The Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, meanwhile told a March 2000 convention of the Rabbinical Assembly that the Conservative movement is “too cerebral and ideological” and that music is “the key to the sacred.” The weekly *Forward* reports, “Rabbi Schorsch’s recommendation to his colleagues came before the news, disclosed at another convention session, that JTS’ regular Friday night services have collapsed as students flock to a neo-chasidic ‘Happy Clappy Minyan’ that sings prayers to the tunes of the late Rabbi Schlomo Carlebach.”²

That is a great departure from the JTS tradition. The synagogue associated with the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York’s Park Avenue Synagogue, has a 70-year history of commissioning classical liturgical music.³ Its present Senior Cantor, David Lefkowitz, is a musicologist who specializes in reviving and performing 19th-century liturgical works in high classical style. The change is less jarring on the Jewish side, but still wrenching. *Wo es christelt, da judelt es auch.*

While both religions make accommodations to popular culture and generational change, hardly a word of discussion has appeared among Jewish and Catholic theologians. This not only is lamentable, but it is potentially catastrophic. It reveals a profound lack of interest in what Christian as well as Jewish religious worship intends to achieve. In particular, Franz Rosenzweig would have argued that Christianity cannot long exist in the absence of Christian culture. For the Church to embrace rock music portends an acceleration in its own decline.”

Clergymen today usually speak of the appropriateness of music to a religious setting strictly in terms of association. The congregation associates certain music with devotion, and changing that association might confuse it. Of course, association is a matter of habit, and it easily may be argued that the congregation will come to associate a new sort of music with devotion if only it is played often enough. There is a place for this kind of pragmatism, but the great German-Jewish thinkers of the early 20th century thought on a loftier plane, in terms of the nature of worship and the nature of music.

Rosenzweig explains that Judaism and Christianity employ different means to evoke eternity. Judaism recreates eternity in the practice of Jewish life, while Christianity undertakes an eternal journey towards redemption. As a kinship community, the Jewish people have a surety of its own immortality in the form of its own life cycle. The Kingdom of God is not an aspiration but a reality made palpable in Shabbat, a foretaste of the world to come. By contrast, Christianity promises the infinite at the end of time, and offers a perpetual journey between two end-points – Crucifixion and the final Resurrection. For this reason, Rosenzweig adds, it requires the Cathedral vaulting towards heaven, the perspective vanishing at infinity, the goal-oriented motion of tonal music, in short, Christian culture, to evoke it.

There exists a huge literature on this subject; perhaps the most enduring contribution came in the early years of the 20th century from another great Jewish thinker, the music theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935). Schenker created the standard theory of musical structure taught in most American and some European universities. He holds that all the great classical compositions submit to a “fundamental structure” (*Ursatz*). The fundamental structure, ultimately related to the generation of musical tones in nature, enfolds the smallest details of a piece into an overarching teleological goal. Heinrich Schenker, a Viennese Jew and his predominantly Jewish students promulgated this theory before World War II. By the 1980s it had become the standard curriculum. Schenker, to be sure, sought inspiration in Goethe’s morphology of plants rather than in the Torah, but he never obscured his Jewish origin.

A leading American Schenkerian, Prof. Charles Burkhart of City University of New York, observes that Schenker’s teleological concept of music has deep parallels to Christian theology. For the Christian, Rosenzweig explains, (classical) music creates a bridge between the clock-time of the

world and the teleological time of Christianity, which marches from Revelation to Redemption. Western music accomplishes its true purpose, Rosenzweig contends, in the church rather than the concert hall.

In the Church year as in ours, an annually recurring celebration of revelation is erected...in the form of a sequence of three festival seasons. And among the arts it is music that is coordinate with revelation...

[Christian] revelation fixes a marker in the middle of time...It is reflected with maximum clarity and can best be grasped by short-lived mankind in the Church year, and here again in the festivals of revelation in particular. These festivals, pointing backward toward the creation of revelation and forward toward revealed redemption, incorporate the immeasurable eternity of the day of God into the annual cycle of the Church year. By integrating itself into these festivals and in the Church year as a whole, the individual piece of music alights from the artificial frame of its ideal time and becomes wholly alive.⁴

Modern (i.e., Schenker's) music theory identifies goal-oriented motion as the *differentia specifica* of Western classical music. The fundamental structure undertakes a great passage away from and a return to the tonic, and all the elements composition are there to prolong this journey. One might argue that the concept of music as a journey arose in response to a need, specifically Christianity's need to recreate the soul's journey toward redemption, just as the cathedral ceiling stretching towards heaven in ordered proportions evokes the infinite. For that matter, Western classical music emerged at the end of the 15th century with the explicit understanding that the "laws of music" derived from a higher source than earthly laws, the "numbers in the mind of God" rather than the numbers of human imagining.⁵

In Rosenzweig's view, Christianity is the essence of Western music. The reverse also is true: Christian culture is the essence of Christianity. Again, Rosenzweig: "He who joins in singing a chorale, or who listens to the mass, the Christmas oratorio, the passion...wants to make his soul stand with both feet in time, in the most real time of all, in the time of the one day of the world of which all individual world days are but a part. Music is supposed to escort him there."⁶

That is, classical music is not merely written by Christians for Christian functions, but its nature and reason for being are Christian to begin with. Because Christianity's journey never ends en route to a goal that is never in sight, it requires the "escort" of Christian culture. On the other hand, Judaism brings Eternity into daily life⁷, whereas Christianity undertakes a perpetual journey towards Eternity. Orthodox Jews eschew the use of musical instruments entirely during Sabbath and festival services, and most congregations restrict music to melismatic oriental chant. They do not "need" the elaborate artifice of classical music to achieve a sense of Eternity, Rosenzweig says, for the simple reason that Judaism recreates Eternity in daily life. "Blessed art Thou, our God, King of the Universe, who plants eternal life among us...."

Christian music suppresses the moment in favor of the teleological goal. By contrast, the paragon of Jewish liturgical music is the Cantor standing between God and the congregation, imploring God to bring His presence here and now. The melismatic Oriental chant of Jewish worship knows neither beginning nor end; it is the present, the immediacy of God's presence, which calls forth its passion. In Western classical music, by contrast, the moment has no substance. It is perpetually sacrificed to the goal of tonal motion.

Christianity's high culture has ceased to become popular, and the Catholic Church (among many other Christian denominations) appears willing to invite in popular culture instead. Pop music has no overarching goal, however. It celebrates the moment, the sensual moment of enjoyment, in sharp contrast to the sanctified time of Judaism. Without the "escort" of Christian culture, the Christian is far less likely to stay out the eternal journey toward redemption. Indeed, the decision of

the Church to embrace rock music substantially lowers the odds of its own institutional survival. Those of us who believe that the survival of Christianity is good for the Jews can only shake our heads in sadness.

Jews face a double problem. One is to slide back into popular culture by bringing the music of the street into the synagogue. It is entirely wrong, both theologically and musically, to insist that music provide the path to sanctity in Jewish worship. Our traditional melismatic music is a form of rhetoric, an enhancement of speech, the better with which to raise our collective voice to the God who hears prayer. Classical music has a place in Jewish worship. For the same reason that we crown the Torah scrolls with silver and wear our best clothing to synagogue on Shabbat, we should enjoy the Sabbath with the most beautiful music available – which happens to be the classical style created by Christianity. Classical music is no more Jewish than are pearls and neckties, but they are suitable adornments for Shabbat and festivals. If need be we can do quite well without them, thank you.

That is why even the worst possible choices in musical matters present immeasurably less danger to Judaism than to Christianity. On the other hand, Western classical music is so convincing that it makes Christians out of Jews. Felix Mendelssohn is the most famous example, but not the last. Jews comprised most of Schenker's circle of students in Vienna, but they made music into a secular religion. A more recent case in point is Mr. Norman Podhoretz, the former editor of *Commentary*. In a recent publication, he claims to detect Jewish sensibility in Bach's submission to "the yoke of heaven" in the form of musical laws, particularly in Bach's "Matthew Passion."⁸ Because Mr. Podhoretz is Jewish and loves the "Matthew Passion," he wants it to be Jewish. Another possible interpretation is that Bach does not display Jewish sensibility, but rather that Mr. Podhoretz displays Christian sensibility.

Within the overlapping framework of Rosenzweig's theology and Schenker's music theory, the latter interpretation seems more likely. Schenker's demonstration of the underlying lawfulness of great classical music applies quite as well to Chopin Mazurkas and Beethoven piano sonatas as it does to Bach. What makes the 48 fugues of the Well-Tempered Clavier so fascinating is the way in which they break the academic rules of fugue writing, not their adherence to them. "Bach is not a good model because he allows himself too many exceptions," warned a standard 19th-century textbook, adding, "There is not a single correctly written fugue among Bach's 'Forty-Eight.'"⁹ Modern music theory would say, rather, that Bach sacrifices the superficial rules of contrapuntal setting in the service of a higher level of coherence.

Bach's spiritual audacity rather than his supposed lawfulness is what endears the "Matthew Passion" to Mr. Podhoretz. The "Matthew Passion" offers numerous examples of this sort of rule-breaking, none more dramatic than No. 33 of the first part, the soprano/alto duet with double chorus, "So ist mein Jesus nun gefangen." Plaintively and passively, the duet sings, "Now my Jesus is captured. They are leading him away." Off-rhythm and unexpectedly, the chorus breaks in, "Untie Him! Let Him go!" In order to give vent to the listener's anger at the capture of Jesus at Gethsemane, Bach intentionally sacrifices musical expectations in order to serve a higher, dramatic purpose.

The "Matthew Passion" is a drama, perhaps a greater one than any opera. But it is a drama specifically enacted in a church, where the entire congregation is an actor in a Passion Play. For this reason, the work's effect is incomparably stronger when performed in a church as opposed to on the stage. The congregation is represented by the Second Chorus, which sings chorale arrangements of hymns well known to the average churchgoer. Four-part hymn singing was taught universally to elementary school students in Bach's Saxony starting in the late 17th century. Three levels of dialogue take place, namely, between the Second Chorus, First Chorus (which requires better-trained musicians) and the soloists, who offer intimate commentary upon the Gospel story.

There is, however, one sense in which the “Matthew Passion” has a strong tinge of Jewish sensibility. Just as the observant Jew actually leaves Egypt during the Passover Seder, the believing Lutheran actually watches with Jesus at Gethsemane and actually lays Him in the grave. Examples of this kind of pietistic identification abound in Bach’s religious music. To cite only a few from the Matthew Passion: In No. 13 the Chorus sings, “I want to stand with you.” The tenor soloist of No. 26 sings, “I want to watch with my Jesus.” In No. 75 the bass sings, “Make yourself clean, my heart. I myself want to bury Jesus.” In this regard one should note the reference to the Song of Songs in the great double-chorus which opens the work. “Come, ye daughters, help me mourn,” refers of course to the daughters of Jerusalem whom the Beloved implored not to wake the sleeping bridegroom in the Hebrew pastoral. Correspondingly, Bach sets the chorus in the 6/8 meter of the pastorale (a performance indication too often neglected by conductors ignorant of the Biblical reference).

Perhaps it is too late in the cycle of Western cultural senility to have a sensible discussion on these matters. Cardinal Ratzinger no longer writes polemics about Church music. No-one will interrupt the “happy clappy minyan” at the Jewish Theological Seminary to talk about music theory. But at some point theologians will have to take these matters seriously, if the two great Western religions are to keep their respective heads above the morass of popular culture.

1. “Pope John Paul Rocks!,” by Bill Hoffman, *The New York Post*, April 13, 2000, p. 3.
2. “Happy Clappy Minyan, Music On Rise Among Conservatives,” in *The Forward*, March 31, 2000.
3. The author belongs to the Park Avenue Synagogue.
4. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame 1970), pp. 359-361.
5. See David P. Goldman, “Nicholas of Cusa’s Contribution to Music Theory,” in *Rivista Internazionale di Musica Sacra*, Vol. 10, no. 3-4 (July-December 1989), pp. 308-338.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Abraham J. Heschel’s famous meditation *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux 1951) contains a better-known and more accessible presentation of the same content.
8. In *Prospect*, December 1999.
9. Ebenezer Prout, *Fugue* (1891), quoted in Alfred Mann, *The Study of Fugue* (W.W. Norton: New York 1965), p. 8.

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