

Discovering Jewish Music

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Hasidism and Jewish Music

A combination of external events and internal Jewish politics also played a major role in expanding Ashkenazic Jewish music. One particularly difficult era in Jewish history was the period 1648–1658, during which Bogdan Chmielnicki governed Poland. Thousands were killed in vicious pogroms and the survivors were plunged into intense despair. One Jewish tradition predicts that the Messiah will arrive when the suffering of the people is at its greatest. Many felt that the time was ripe for deliverance, and thousands were convinced that it had indeed arrived with the appearance of Shabbatai Zevi,²⁶ who proclaimed himself the Messiah and attracted hordes of followers—only to devastate them when he converted to Islam. Reeling from their experience, his erstwhile followers—and even those who had merely stood back and observed his effect upon the community—were returned to their misery.

Adding insult to this injury was the stratification that existed within the Jewish community. Extreme poverty kept all but the very wealthy—or those whose brilliance could attract wealthy patrons—from devoting their lives to study in schools of higher Jewish learning called yeshivot. The small minority of yeshivah students

represented a Jewish elite, an “upper class” of Jews, whose greater knowledge was presumed to be accompanied by greater piety and spirituality and a much better relationship with the Almighty than that to which ordinary working folk could aspire.

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (ca.1700–1760) stepped into the breach in the late 1730s, revealing himself as a charismatic wonder-worker²⁷ and champion of the average person. Combining aspects of kabbalistic thought with his own teachings, Rabbi Israel became known as the Ba’al Shem Tov, (the “owner of the Good Name”) or Besht (B’Sh’T). Violently opposed by leaders of the yeshivah world and ultimately excommunicated by the Vilna Gaon²⁸ for his nontraditional teachings, the Besht attracted many followers with his assertion that sincerity and a strong desire to commune with the Almighty could raise one to spiritual heights.

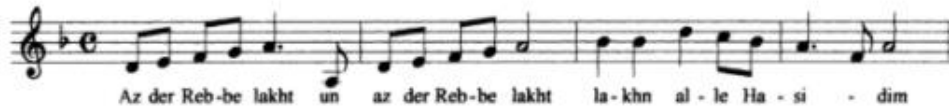
Among the Ba’al Shem Tov’s claims was the notion that music could be an especially potent medium for the expression of human emotion and communication with Heaven. The Besht shared the kabbalists’ view that music was synonymous with joy, and that joy was the force that could overpower evil—including one’s own evil inclination (*yetzer ha-ra*). Words were unnecessary; a pure melody, called a *nig’n* (from the Hebrew *nigun*, “melody”) could express this joy. The kabbalists taught that any human creation had a spark of divinity within it, so even a non-Jewish melody had the capacity to glow brightly if used “properly.”



Example 2.22 From Nig’n attributed to the Ba’al Shem Tov

In addition to personally composing many *nigunim* still sung today, the Ba’al Shem Tov and the Hasidic masters²⁹ who followed him “borrowed” foreign melodies and adapted them for service to the Almighty. This contrafaction enriched the repertoire of the Jewish community both consciously and subconsciously. The entire controversy itself between the Hasidim and those who rejected their approach (called *Mitnaggedim*, literally “opposers”) yielded another

enrichment of the Yiddish repertoire: parody songs by leaders of the opposition that made fun of the relationship between the Hasidic rebbe and his students. In an ironic twist, the Hasidim rejected the sarcasm inherent in these songs and embraced them as their own. Subsequent generations with no relationship to either side continue to sing these songs as simply part of the repertoire of Eastern Europe.



Example 2.23 From "Az der Rebbe"

When the rabbi laughs, all the Hasidim laugh.
When the rabbi sings, all the Hasidim sing.
When the rabbi dances, all the Hasidim dance.
When the rabbi speaks, all the Hasidim sleep.

Notwithstanding "borrowings" by *klezmerim* and Hasidim, Ashkenazic Jewish music continued to observe the rabbinic ban on music for its own sake. However, as Western music continued to evolve, the gulf between Western practices and synagogue song widened—and the challenges to Jewish musical integrity and continuity increased. A similar scenario was not being played out in the Oriental or Sephardic worlds, though. In neither of those communities did secular music undergo as fundamental an alteration as it did in the West—and therefore, neither Oriental nor Sephardic Jewish music has undergone much change. It will therefore be our challenge in the chapters that follow to explore Ashkenazic Jewry's continuing confrontation with the West and the evolution of Ashkenazic notions of Jewish musical "tradition."