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JEWISH music is as difficult to define as the Jewish people itself. There are those who deny the reality of a Jewish music. They say that what is called Jewish music is really Slavic or Balkan, Babylonian or Egyptian. Some are willing to admit that in the far-distant past in the land of Judea there was a Hebraic music. They will identify certain chants of the synagogue as its legitimate descendant. But they maintain that there has been no Jewish music since the Jews left their land in the first century of the Common Era.

We who are embarking this week on a month of Jewish Music Festival do not share this view. We begin our festival on the day which is called The Sabbath of the Song, the Sabbath on which the synagogue Bible-reading contains the song of Moses after the crossing of the Red Sea.

The Jews, at the very beginning of their career as a unified group, felt the need to give voice to their great experience in music. From then on until the present, the people has had its high dramatic moments, its deep tragedy, its religious faith, its simple joys and sorrows, and always it has needed to give them utterance in music. Whatever music has survived has helped them to remember and share the emotions of generations past, who have lived in widely scattered communities all over the world.

Unmistakable Stamp

Always they have been affected by the music of their neighbors. True, they have borrowed from Egypt and Babylon, from the troubadours and minnesingers, from Russian peasants and from Lutheran choirmasters. But the residue of the centuries bears the unmistakable stamp of their own peculiar wistfulness, puritanism, or wry humor.

So long as their music remained on the level of a folk art, in the synagogue or in the home life of the Jews, it was not too hard to describe. It was vocal and monophonic. The religious music was unified all through the Diaspora by a single faith and by a single Hebrew language. It was preserved, somehow, by oral tradition. The secular folksongs in various Jewish vernaculars, lullabies, love songs, work songs, nonsense songs, grew with each new settlement, and were forgotten with each expulsion.

But beginning about 150 years ago, with the rise of liberalism and the emancipation of the Jews, Jewish music began to reflect the new influences that had complicated Jewish life. The simple folk art could no longer express the maelstrom of emotion, the rapid succession of catastrophic events. Moreover, once the Jews were permitted to taste the fruits of the rich musical development of the western world, they could no longer be content with the simple unaccompanied melodic line which they had inherited. Jews moved into musical history at the point where romanticism and the emergence of the individual were at their fullest flower. They moved along with the wave of nationalism in Europe. As time went on, they experimented, with their contemporaries, in new forms, in atonalism and twelve-tonalism.

New Musical Forms

Changes in religious outlook and ritual cried out for new musical forms. The rise of Jewish nationalism and the renaissance of the Hebrew language found the outlet in experiments with the creation of an art music, which had never before existed as a separate entity in Jewish life. The hard but vital pioneering years in Palestine are recorded in the birth of new folksongs which rapidly gave way to art forms, even before the establishment of the state of Israel.

Simultaneously with the movement outward toward world music came the inward search and research, the recording and arranging of the folk tradition. While in the past secular folk songs were shortlived, they were now carefully notated and preserved.

We Jews in America feel that we may rightfully claim as our heritage all this music which gave voice and still gives voice to the experiences of our people. We share the feeling of awe and humility in the ancient Kaddish chant for the Day of Atonement. Ours is the tragic outcry for all our suffering people in Ernest Bloch's "Schelomo." For us who lost six million brothers and sisters in foul murder, the little Yiddish conversation song of a matchmaker and a girl holds memories of a life that has been wiped out, but whose values can still live in us.

The song of the Israeli soldier stirs us with pride, and the strange new tone-poem composed in Israel, out of the new instrumental timbres, the odd rhythms, the new polyphonies of East and West, brings us a proxy pleasure of accomplishment in a shared dream and a shared effort.

It is natural that the greatest vitality in contemporary creation of Jewish music should be manifested in Israel. There Jewish life provides the primary culture of the people. There the quality of the land and its sounds permeate every moment of life, and inevitably find their echoes in the music that is composed. For American Jewry, Jewish life and culture are secondary. The melodies and rhythms that permeate our lives are those of America. Nevertheless, American Jewry is producing its share of the group heritage.

Good, bad, or indifferent, Jewish music is still very much alive and growing. When the National Jewish Music Council and the National Jewish Welfare Board sponsor a festival of Jewish music, it encourages the people to listen to the old and the new. It provides an opportunity for sloughing off the synthetic, cheap and tawdry, and for recognizing the sincere and beautiful. The community discovers unsuspected resources and talents, and at the same time becomes aware of its unfulfilled needs. In helping the Jews to know Jewish music, it helps them to know themselves.

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