

Adaptation, Synthesis and Transformation — Music Between Two Cultures

During the period between the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, German philosophy, science, and music were infused with Jewish culture and consciousness, resulting in great contributions by both Germans and Jews. This was a period of remarkable history that ended brutally with the Holocaust.

This program is dedicated to composers who formed a successful link between the Germanic tradition and Jewish culture, both in Germany and Israel. Each composer did this in his own way. Beethoven adapted a theme from an oratorio by Handel which narrates a chapter of early Jewish history. Bruch wove Jewish religious melodies into a fabric of late nineteenth century German romanticism. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy transcended his Jewish heritage and adapted to the musical culture that surrounded him. Stutchewsky and Ben-Haim, who became leading exponents of the pioneering Israeli national school, spent their formative years in Germany during the two decades before the Nazis ascended to power.

Beethoven's Twelve Variations on a chorus from Handel's oratorio 'Judas Maccabeus' (1746) are based on a musical theme that was adopted both as a Hanukkah song, as well as a Christmas Carol. In both Hebrew and German adaptations the melody's original meaning was altered because new words replaced those from the libretto. In Handel's oratorio, the following verses, address Judas Maccabeus, the victorious leader of the Jews: "See, the conqu'ring hero comes!/Sound the trumpets, beat the drums!/Sports prepare, the laurel bring,/Songs of triumph to him sing." Handel's hymn is meant to be played as a jubilant march welcoming the hero, while the reclaimed temple of Jerusalem is being prepared for the first "Feast of Lights." Its message is not bellicosity, but the joy of liberty. Beethoven's elaborately wrought variations on this popular tune, composed in 1796 (exactly fifty years after Handel's oratorio), demonstrate his mastery of form as well as his early recognition of the expressive possibilities of the cello.

Max Bruch composed 'Kol Nidrei' (sub-titled 'Adagio on Hebrew Melodies') in 1880. How could a non-Jewish German composer of the late nineteenth century become attracted by such a subject matter? Bruch, who was an enthusiastic collector and arranger of folk melodies, answered this question himself when recalling "...I became acquainted with Kol Nidrei and a few other songs in Berlin through the Lichtenstein family, who befriended me. Even though I am a Protestant, as an artist I deeply felt the outstanding beauty of these melodies and therefore I gladly spread them through my arrangement." The first section of Bruch's composition is based on the prayer which begins Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. The second half of the composition introduces the middle section of the old folk song "O weep for those that wept on Babel's Stream." Although Bruch's music isn't Jewish, it is performed frequently in concert halls and reform synagogues to this day. Over the course of more than a century, audiences continue to recognize its romantic glow and beauty.

The Ukrainian cellist **Joachim Stutchewsky** was born in 1891 into a well-known family of Klezmer musicians. He received his classical training between the age of 18 and 21, under the tutelage of the eminent cello virtuoso and pedagogue Julius Klengel in Leipzig. At the onset of World War I he settled in Zurich, where he soon became a lifelong advocate of Jewish classical music. In 1924 he relocated to Vienna, where he became a co-founder of the legendary Vienna String Quartet. Under the leadership of the violinist Rudolf Kolisch, the Quartet dedicated itself to the performance of the compositions by Schoenberg and his disciples. In 1938, he was forced to escape to Switzerland, and thereafter settled in Palestine. The two pieces on our program, Bessarabic Song and Dance, are taken from his 'Hassidic Suite,' composed in 1946, and are the first and last in sequence. The first piece, which is serene and peaceful in character, reminds us of a Sabbath melody (zmirá). The second one, in its improvisatory abandon, recalls his Klezmer background.

Paul Ben-Haim, whose original name was Paul Frankenburger, was the son of a well-respected Jewish family in Munich. He had all the beginnings of a promising career in music. After completing his studies in conducting and composition at the Music Academy in Munich, he became the assistant of Hans Knappertsbusch and Bruno Walter at the Munich Court Opera. In 1924, he accepted the post of music director at the Augsburg Theater. Ousted by the Nazis in 1931, he suddenly became unemployable, and was forced to emigrate to Palestine in 1933. During his collaboration of fifteen years with the Yemenite folklore singer Braha Zefira, he forged a synthesis between central European traditions and the Jewish folklore—both those of Eastern Europe and of the Yemenite and North African heritage—and became thus a founding father of the national Israeli school of composition. The 'Three Songs Without Words,' (1952) are originally written for voice, but exist in many transcriptions from the composer's own hand. Ben-Haim described the three movements of his 'Three Songs' as "*tone-pictures of an oriental mood.*" He added that "*whoever's imagination needs additional prompting may think that the long-breathed melodies of the 'Arioso' were inspired by the mood of a summer day's pitiless heat in the bare Judean Hills, while the 'Ballad' pictures the monotonous babbling of an oriental story-teller; the last song ['Sephardic Melody'] is based on a traditional folk tune of Sephardic Jewish origin—a veritable pearl which I have only given a setting.*"

The German composer **Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy** was born into a wealthy and highly educated family. His paternal grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, was an important Enlightenment philosopher and a leader of the movement for Jewish

emancipation in Prussia. In order to escape the hardships of the Napoleonic occupation, the family relocated from Hamburg to Berlin in 1812. Despite the Prussian emancipation edict of 1813, which granted Jews almost full rights of citizenship, anti-Semitism remained a real threat. Consequently, the Mendelssohns decided to have their children baptized into the Lutheran church. The name Bartholdy was not adopted until 1822, when Felix's parents themselves converted to Christianity. As the young boy's precocious talent began to unfold, and his fame as a piano prodigy, composer and conductor spread, his father, fearing set-backs to his son's career, urged him to drop the surname Mendelssohn altogether. However, in spite of converting to Christianity, Felix felt a strong sense of Jewish identity and refused to drop his original name. His compositional style strongly reflects the neoclassicist ideals of the Biedermeier, a period that relished simple elegance and clear lines. The Cello Sonata in B-flat major, composed in 1838, is held in balance by the thematic resemblance of the outer two fast movements. Despite its fervent emotionality, this music never belies the fact that it is Apollonian in nature. The middle movement, a character piece in G minor, projects sentiments of melancholy and resignation, and it seems to recall the music that Mendelssohn wrote for 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.'

- Program Notes, Joachim Woitun