



The History of Synagogue Music in London
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Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon, and welcome to this special lecture at Gresham College on the history of synagogue music in London.

At the outset, I should warn you that I have set myself quite a formidable task in covering 365 years of musical history in a multiplicity of different Jewish traditions in the space of a single hour, and of necessity this will mean that no single topic in this lecture will be given much more than a brief introduction and a musical flavour of its unique character. Nonetheless, I hope that by the end of this session I shall have been able to give you a sense of the beauty and variety of ways in which music is used to express prayer in the various Jewish traditions, and of the importance that music holds in the expression of faith for a community which has been part and parcel of the life of the City of London since the time at which Gresham College itself was founded.

For although the historical records state that it was the year 1656 in which Oliver Cromwell authorised Jews to reside and worship in England for the first time since King Edward I's Edict of Expulsion of 1290, in point of fact the synagogue established in Creechurch Lane in the East End of the City of London was in part founded by Marranos already living in London. Marrano is a pejorative term for those Jews hailing primarily from the Iberian Peninsula who had ostensibly converted to Christianity in order to avoid expulsion and harassment by the agents of the Spanish Inquisition, but who maintained their Jewish identity and religious practices in secret.

The earliest direct reference to the style of musical-liturgical practice in this tiny synagogue – hidden from view and accessible only to members and invited guests, for fear of persecution – comes from a letter written by a Mr John Greenhalgh in 1662, describing his visit to observe a Sabbath morning service. Although written from the inexpert perspective of a non-musician, unfamiliar with the format and structure of Jewish worship, it nonetheless provides a fascinating insight into the practices of the community in its infancy. Greenhalgh attests to the importance placed on orderly and musical worship by the officers of the congregation:

'Their chief Ruler was a very rich merchant, a big, black, fierce and stern man to whom I perceive they stand in as reverential an awe as boys to a master; for when any left singing upon their books and talked, or that some were out of tune, he did call aloud with a barbarous thundering voice, and knocked upon the high desk with his fist, that all sounded again.'

Later, Greenhalgh remarks that, during the early part of the service, 'There were two or three composed Hymns, which they... sang very melodiously.' Even Samuel Pepys, who described in his diary his own visit to the same synagogue the following year in far briefer terms, noted that 'Their service [was] all in a singing way'.

Both Greenhalgh and Pepys were witness to prayer services conducted in what has become known as the Spanish & Portuguese rite, which is still practised today in Bevis Marks synagogue, opened in 1701 around the corner from the smaller synagogue in Creechurch Lane as its much

larger successor. The adherents of this tradition were Sephardi Jews – meaning those whose ancestry was originally from the Iberian Peninsula – Marranos, in some cases from families who had been living as secret Jews for well over a century, with no Jewish congregational life, limited Jewish education, and under constant threat of discovery by the Inquisition. Eventually many of these 'secret Jews' left Iberia to live in countries with far more welcoming attitudes towards Jews, such as Protestant Holland, where they formed a Jewish community which provided many of the original members of the tiny London community. Musically-speaking, their tastes were highly influenced by the non-Jewish music, both sacred and secular, which had become their formative experience of musical expression. Hence, the chanting and singing which would have constituted the musical elements of the services witnessed by Greenhalgh and Pepys – whilst deriving in part from the Mediterranean Sephardi chants taught to them by ministers sent from those communities – would have exhibited a definite 'Western accent', characterised by the exclusive use of the major and minor musical modes, rather than the more complicated tonal systems favoured by their Arab-influenced co-religionists. We can get a flavour of this style of chant from the following recording, made in 1958 by the Cantor, Reverend Eliezer Abinun, together with members of the congregation of Bevis Marks synagogue singing in unison one of the traditional melodies of the community – in this case, one of the penitential prayers from the Day of Atonement.

Recording 1: Cantor Eliezer Abinun and the Choir of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation – Hatanu Tsurenu (Traditional Spanish & Portuguese)

Whilst the first formal synagogue opened following the Cromwellian Re-admission of Jews to England was Sephardi, the other great strand of the Jewish people – the Ashkenazim – was represented in London from the beginning. Initially, the Ashkenazi Jews – those who originated from Germany and Central Europe – had no place of worship of their own, but their numbers soon increased, and by 1690 the first Ashkenazi congregation had come into existence on Duke's Place, literally around the corner from the Sephardi synagogue. In 1722 the congregation opened their purpose-built sanctuary, now known as the Great Synagogue, which maintained the extremely close proximity to its new Sephardi counterpart on Bevis Marks, and which stood for nearly 220 years until it was destroyed by an air raid in 1941.

Ashkenazi liturgical practice falls into two broad categories – the Western and the Eastern European traditions. Musically-speaking, both strands use a system known as *nussach*, a term which encompasses a particular musical mode or scale, as well as certain set modulations and particular musical phrases or cadences. There is a set *nussach* for each different service on weekdays, Sabbaths, Festivals, High Holidays and other special occasions. Unlike the Spanish & Portuguese rite, these Ashkenazi musical modes do not usually coincide with a pure major or minor scale of the Western Classical variety. Another major difference is that, whilst the Sephardi cantor must reproduce the chant of the prayer services exactly as he has learnt them from his teacher, with very little latitude for variation, the Ashkenazi cantor is expected to improvise freely within the appropriate *nussach* for the service in question, whilst still remaining within the defined musical characteristics of that *nussach*.

The Eastern Ashkenazi tradition – about which we shall speak more a little later on – places significant emphasis on the musical, vocal and improvisational skill of its cantors, whereas the Western tradition – into which category the initial Ashkenazi community of London fell – places a greater emphasis on congregational melodies and composed tunes. Many of these melodies are specific to particular Festivals or occasions in the Jewish calendar, and therefore lend each date of note a musical character all its own. A good example of this is the following melody for the *Kaddish*, a prayer which marks the end of a particular section of the service. This *Kaddish* is sung by the cantor immediately following the reading of the portion from the *Torah* at the morning service on the three Pilgrimage Festivals – Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. The melody is a traditional one of German origin, which was already known as part of the tradition by 1815, when it was incorporated by Isaac Nathan as part of his 'Hebrew Melodies' collection, set to a new English

text composed by Lord Byron.

Recording 2: Cantor Moshe Haschel and Carys Hughes (Organ) – Kaddish for Festival mornings (Traditional Western Ashkenazi)

The first century of the Great Synagogue's existence saw it engage a number of respected cantors, some of whom also achieved musical distinction outside the sacred sphere. Perhaps the most famous of these was Myer Lyon, known better by his Italianised stage name, Michael Leoni. At the time of his engagement in 1767, the musical structure of the prayer services in most Western Ashkenazi congregations had expanded from just the cantor chanting on his own, to encompass two accompanying singers – a *Meshorrer* or high singer, usually a boy treble, and a *Bassista* or bass. These two extra singers would provide a basic, often extemporised, harmonic backing to the singing of the cantor, in lieu of instrumental accompaniment, which is forbidden in Orthodox worship on the Sabbath and Holy Days, and would occasionally provide vocal diversions to allow the cantor to rest during the longer, more vocally and physically demanding services, such as those on the Day of Atonement.

The musical character of the items which have come down to us from this period reveal a significant element of borrowing from the rococo style, with florid vocal lines, significant use of melisma and word repetition, and not always with a great regard for the traditional *nussach* or melody applicable to the prayer being intoned. No doubt this use of secular musical style appealed to the congregants of these synagogues at the time, but the virtuoso vocal character and great variety of melodies employed by the cantors of this period may also have had another purpose; in the synagogue music collection of cantor Aaron Beer, who held a position in Berlin from 1765, and whose collection includes several items composed by Lyon, Beer writes of his intention that each of these melodies be sung no more than once a year: 'If a person hear a tune but once a year, it will be impossible for him to sing with the cantor during the service, and therefore he will not be able to confuse the cantor. It has become a plague to the cantors to have the members of the congregation join the song.'

Myer Lyon was originally appointed to the role of soprano *Meshorrer* at the Great Synagogue, at a salary of £40 per annum, but his fine vocal quality soon brought him patronage and wider fame, and he was able to forge a dual career as synagogue cantor at the Great, and opera singer at the Covent Garden Theatre. Undoubtedly his most enduring contribution was to the sphere of sacred music, in the form of his fine melody for the hymn *Yigdal*, which is based on Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith and is used to close the Sabbath evening service on Friday nights. His composition so impressed the Wesleyan minister Thomas Olivers, that he wrote a Christian hymn – 'The God of Abraham, Praise' – to be sung to this specific melody, which he credited to its composer by name. The melody itself has gained lasting popularity in both the Christian and Jewish religions, and is nowadays used every Friday evening in British synagogues which follow the United Synagogue tradition – the present-day successor body to the Great Synagogue.

Recording 3: Monty Fisher and the Emmanuel Fisher Choir under the direction of Emmanuel Fisher – Leoni's Yigdal

By the first quarter of the 19th century, both the Great Synagogue (which had by this point spawned several break-away Ashkenazi congregations) and Bevis Marks (which had not) were facing a similar crisis originating from within their own congregations. During this period there were increasing calls from discontented groups of congregants in both synagogues for elements of the services to be reformed along what were regarded as more 'modern' lines. This lobbying became more insistent in 1836, when a group of members of the Sephardi congregation petitioned the *Mahamad* – or Board of Management – for the introduction into the service of 'such alterations and modifications as were in the line of the changes introduced in the reform synagogue in Hamburg

and other places.' There were a number of specific areas which were of concern to those pressing for such changes, including the shortening of the overall length of the prayers, starting the services at a later hour on Sabbath mornings, and the introduction of a choir. These demands did not fall on entirely deaf ears, although the moderate changes introduced by the *Mahamad* at this time would not – in the end – be enough to satisfy the group of congregants concerned – of which more later.

In regard to the demand for the introduction of a choir, scholars believe that this came about in part as a reaction to what the group of congregants in question would have regarded as the unfavourable comparison between the perceived decorum of Church services – which were attended on Sundays by many Jews, especially those of significant financial means and business interests, as a way of gaining social acceptance with their non-Jewish peers – and the perceived lack of decorum in the Sabbath services at Bevis Marks.

The latter may well be imagined by anyone who has visited this synagogue, bearing in mind its large size and echoing acoustic, and the fact that significant portions of the service are sung not by the cantor alone, but by the entire congregation together in unison. The large space over which the congregants are spread in the synagogue would only have made more elusive the already unachievable goal of everyone singing in time with each other in the absence of a central musical leadership. The suggestion of introducing a choir, therefore, seems to have found favour with the gentlemen of the *Mahamad*, and in their annual meeting at the end of 1837, the Board of Elders – the senior governing body of the congregation – approved steps taken by the *Mahamad* 'to promote order and solemnity in our religious worship'. The steps in question consisted of 'the establishment of a choir to chant certain portions of the prayers.'

That the initial function of the choir was primarily to lead the congregation in those sections of the prayers which were sung by them rather than by the cantor – as indeed is the case in the present day – may be inferred from the fact that during the next few months, congregational records refer to a number of 'interruptions' to the choir's discharge of its function, such that the Board of Elders was obliged to urge the congregation to co-operate. By the end of 1838, the choir committee reported that the choir had been established with six paid choristers and ten boys from 'the Public Schools'. The choir's first professional choirmaster had been appointed in the person of Mr Moss, at a salary of £20 per annum. The original music composed by Moss for the choir still forms part of its repertoire down to the present day, as exemplified by his setting of Psalm 150, which is reserved for use on the Festival of Simhat Torah, marking the end of the annual cycle of the reading of the Torah, and for the following Sabbath, which marks the beginning of the new cycle.

Recording 4: The Choir of The Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation under the direction of Maurice Martin, with Laurence Hasson (boy soloist) and G Campbell Hughes (Organ) – Halleluyah (Moss)

Over the next four decades, the Bevis Marks choir went through a number of short-lived choirmasters, not all of whom had easy relationships with the congregation in general or the *Mahamad* in particular. This unsettled period came to a conclusion with the appointment of Elias Robert Jessurun in 1881, who held the post until his death in 1933. To Jessurun can be attributed the organisation of the congregation's liturgical music and its systematic harmonisation, as well as a high degree of success in the tuition of the choristers under his direction in musicianship and the institution of a regular rehearsal regimen, all of which quickly bore fruit in the quality of the choir's music-making and its appreciation by the members of the congregation. In 1931, marking his Jubilee in the role, Jessurun published a selection of his harmonisations of some of the congregation's traditional melodies, an example of which can be heard in the following recording of the prayer *Hashkibenu* – Cause us, our Father, to lie down in peace – which is sung on the evenings of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals.

Recording 5: The Rinah Ensemble under the direction of Eliot Alderman, with Cantor Philip Maurice and Avraham Maurice (boy soloist) – Hashkibenu (Traditional Spanish & Portuguese)

Jessurun's style of choral arrangement came to define the harmonic sound of the Spanish & Portuguese synagogue repertoire; it contextualises the traditional liturgical chants in a four-part vocal environment straight out of the Victorian hymn book, and there is no doubt that it did much to cement the sound-world of this music firmly in the Western Classical mould.

Further work in completing the harmonisation of the congregation's melodies, and in the recruitment and training of choristers from within the ranks of the congregation was undertaken by Jessurun's successor Jacob Hadida, who served in the post between 1933 and 1937, and then again from 1945 to 1954. He used Jessurun's published work together with a mixture of other published sources and his own simple but effective choral arrangements to create the most complete written 'canon' of the congregation's choral chants that had yet been produced up to that time. In a departure from the pedagogical practice of his predecessor, he also taught all his choristers – both young and old – to read and sing from written musical notation (albeit in the form of tonic sol-fa, which was a more popular type of notation at that time than it has been in more recent decades). He is remembered very fondly today by the older members of the choir for the effort, care and attention he gave to his singers in group rehearsals and one-on-one lessons, ensuring that each and every one of them was able to give of their very best to contribute to the choir; he is also remembered for the sharp discipline he lost no time in meting out to those boys who dared to misbehave in rehearsal! These two areas of effort on Hadida's part resulted in arguably the period of highest quality music-making for the congregational choir during the entire 20th century.

In 1951, Hadida, together with the choir and the then-cantor of Bevis Marks synagogue, Abraham Beniso, recorded a set of LPs of melodies from the synagogue, with Hadida himself playing the harmonium. They provide a good overview of Hadida's more direct harmonic style and the gusto with which he directed his ensemble, as in the following recording of *El Nora Alilah*, a prayer used to open the final service on the Day of Atonement, as the sun sinks low in the West.

Recording 6: Cantor Abraham Beniso and the Choir of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation under the direction of Jacob Hadida – El Nora (Traditional Spanish & Portuguese)

Turning back to the Ashkenazi community, in the first part of the 19th century, the Great Synagogue had been subject to similar demands for reform as had their Sephardi brethren, but in their case the suggestion of dispensing with the old system of cantor, *meshorret* and *bassista* in favour of a full choir was hampered by opposition to change on the part of the synagogue's ageing Chief Rabbi, Solomon Hirschell, who had been in post since 1802. Amongst other issues, Hirschell had strong objections to the use of what he termed 'The Book of Strokes' – meaning written musical notation – on the part of any officiants of the service.

In the meantime, the old vocal trio system persisted. In 1827, a new cantor was appointed to the pulpit, in the person of Binom Elias from Germany. He brought with him his own *meshorret*, the 14-year-old Julius Lazarus Mombach, whose musical career at the synagogue significantly outlasted that of his master Elias, who had to retire only two years later after catching a chill which ruined his singing voice. Mombach, on the other hand, remained in his position, and worked with Elias' successor as cantor, Solomon Ascher.

By 1841, the health of the 79-year-old Rabbi Hirschell was in significant decline, following a fall the previous year in which he had fractured his thigh, and he had since been almost entirely confined

to his house. Perhaps it was his effective exclusion from the day-to-day life of the synagogue which motivated those who desired the formation of a formal choir to go ahead and have one formed despite the Rabbi's objections, and although Hirschell did not pass away until the following year, the choir came into existence in 1841 under the leadership of Mombach, who remained in post until his death in 1880. By the 1860s, he was dividing his time between the Great Synagogue and the New Synagogue in Great St Helen's Street (opened in 1838). His duties on a Sabbath morning began at the New, and he would walk over to the Great part-way through the morning, where the congregation would reportedly rise in his honour as he entered.

Mombach composed a large body of choral repertoire for the synagogue, which joined the ranks of the new synagogue choral style pioneered by his counterparts on the European continent, Salomon Sulzer and later Louis Lewandowski, in coming to define the sound-world of the Western Ashkenazi services as they are still practised down to the present day in the UK and the Commonwealth. Like Sulzer, Mombach's works pay due care an attention to the traditional *nussach* and melodies of the prayer services whilst treating them in a quintessentially Western harmonic style of arrangement which would probably have been regarded at the time as a legitimate way of 'updating' the older musical traditions. Nonetheless, this process is carried out with evident respect and high regard for the source material. Mombach's original compositions combine a directness of style with an innate sing-ability, influenced by German folk music. A perfect example is his setting of *Ahavas Olom* – 'Everlasting Love' – which is sung to this day in many member synagogues of the United Synagogue on the evening service of Festivals.

Recording 7: The London Jewish Male Choir and The Old Synagogue Singers under the direction of Clive Hyman – Ahavas Olom (Mombach)

These choral innovations at both Bevis Marks and the Great Synagogue notwithstanding, as I have already noted, the modest reforms introduced were insufficient to satisfy those who had demanded them, and on 15th April 1840 a formal break-away congregation came into being, founded by eighteen members of Bevis Marks and a handful of Ashkenazim, mostly from the Great Synagogue. This new congregation was to be called The West London Synagogue of British Jews – West London since it was to be located in that area, far closer to the homes of most of its wealthy founders than the City of London, and British Jews because the Reformers intended to do away with what they regarded as the out-dated distinction between the Sephardi and the Ashkenazi, the two primary historic strands of the religion. A new prayer book was created for the nascent congregation, blending elements of Sephardi and Ashkenazi liturgy with newly-composed prayers.

As may well be imagined, music – and specifically choral music – played a central role in the services of the new synagogue from the outset. Early contributions to its new liturgical music came from Charles Kensington Salaman – founder member of the synagogue, composer, pianist and writer – who wrote no less than 124 settings for the reformed liturgy.

In 1859, the West London Synagogue appointed a non-Jewish organist, Charles Garland Verrinder, who shortly thereafter took over the post of choirmaster in addition. Verrinder remained in post for some 45 years, during which time he had a decisive impact on the musical repertoire of the Reform synagogue – and, by extension, upon the wider musical life of Anglo-Jewry – by bringing his background in Anglican choral music to bear on the Jewish liturgy. In 1880 Verrinder – in collaboration with Salaman – published a large collection of items from the choral repertoire of the West London synagogue, including – along with significant numbers of his own compositions – a number of harmonisations of the so-called traditional melodies of the Spanish & Portuguese congregation, which were evidently still very much in common currency in the newer synagogue. Perhaps Verrinder's best-known original composition, which has achieved a lasting place in the repertoire of many Orthodox synagogues across the UK in addition to the Reform, is his touching

setting of Psalm 121 – *Essa Enai*: I lift mine eyes unto the mountains; whence cometh my help?

Recording 8: The Choir of The West London Synagogue under the direction of Sydney Fixman, with Christopher Bowers-Broadbent (Organ) – Essa Enai (Verrinder)

That this musical collection from the West London Synagogue had a wide impact on Jewish congregations in the UK – including on its parent synagogues of the Orthodox strand – is evident in a number of ways.

A significant number of the musical settings of Verrinder, Salaman, Edward Hart – an early choirmaster of the West London – and Simon Waley – a Warden of the West London around the time of its move to its current, purpose-built premises in Upper Berkeley Street in 1870 – all found their way into the choral repertoire of the Spanish & Portuguese congregation, and are still in use up to the present day. There is evidence that several of these were introduced by choirmaster Jacob Hadida, both the original compositions and the harmonisations of the traditional melodies, but there is every likelihood that they were sung during the tenure of Jessurun, his predecessor.

Melodies from the collection were also prevalent in a publication produced by the United Synagogue – formed by Act of Parliament in 1870 as a union of the Great Synagogue and four other large Ashkenazi synagogues in London. This musical collection originally appeared in 1889 as 'A Handbook of Synagogue Music for Congregational Singing', and then in a significantly expanded form in 1899 as '*Kol Rinnoh V'Sodoh*. The Voice of Prayer and Praise: A Handbook of Synagogue Music for Congregational Singing'. This book has achieved lasting popularity worldwide up to the present day in synagogues still following the choral Western Ashkenazi tradition, and is universally known as 'The Blue Book', after the colour of its binding. It was edited by David M Davis – choirmaster at the New West End Synagogue – and Francis Lyon Cohen – Minister of the Borough New Synagogue – and its stated purpose was two-fold: firstly to provide a comprehensive reference book of choral settings and compositions for the use of choirs in constituents of the United Synagogue, such that the desired aim of the Choir Committee – viz. the improvement of the 'Service of Song' – might be achieved by virtue of the 'instruction of the choristers by note and not by ear.' Secondly, it was explicitly intended that congregants also make use of the book during the synagogue services, to enable them to follow along with the music and join in with the choir:

'It will be found profitable for the congregants to use the volume in synagogue as a companion to the Siddur (Daily Prayer Book) and Machzôr (Festival Prayer Book), since it provides for every choral or congregational occasion throughout the Jewish year, often with alternative settings. Indeed, the Music as well as the Text must necessarily be in the hands of every worshipper who would wish to take a seemly part in the singing.'

The book's Preface further advised that local lists of the items to be sung in individual synagogues on regular Sabbaths be drawn up, 'and a copy pasted in the book of each chorister and co-operating congregant.'

How successful the Blue Book was in achieving the second aim is a matter for debate; since the choristers themselves seem to have been in the practice of being taught by ear rather than being able to read written musical notation, it seems unlikely that the average congregant would have had more success in deciphering the contents of the volume, much less being able to sight-read the music quickly enough to join in with the choir in real time.

But so far as the first aim goes, the book was an unqualified success. It contains selections from a variety of composers, most notably Mombach – around whose music the Preface notes that 'much of Anglo-Jewish Hymnody had been built up' – as well D M Davis the editor of the collection,

Marcus Hast (cantor of the Great Synagogue), Haim Wasserzug (late cantor of the North London Synagogue, whose collection of synagogue compositions had been published in London in 1878), and a large selection from the collection of the West London Synagogue. Also included were a significant number of 'traditional' chants and congregational responses arranged by Francis Lyon Cohen, and a selection of traditional melodies from the Spanish & Portuguese congregation for hymns which, in Ashkenazi congregations, were traditionally sung antiphonally between cantor and congregation, but which the preface noted 'may now be with advantage chanted in accordance with the more devotional use of the *Sephardim*, in which such essentially congregational passages are sung right through by the entire assembly.'

In addition to its own stated aims, the Blue Book may have been, in some respects, a reaction to the publication of the West London Synagogue collection, and no doubt the United Synagogue Choir Committee – in its discussions culminating in the Blue Book's publication – took note of the less-than-professional state of its own choirs when compared to the quality of the professional ensemble at the West London, under the much-admired guidance of Verrinder.

There may also have been another pressing reason for the publication of a book of Orthodox choral synagogue works in the unadulterated Western European Classical style in the last two decades of the 19th century: a demographic shift which was to have an irreversible effect upon the cultural and religious character of Anglo-Jewry.

The wave of anti-Jewish pogroms which swept south-western Imperial Russia between 1881 and 1884 – in the wake of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II – marked a watershed moment in the long history of Eastern European Jewry. For many Jews, it was a 'wake-up call' which led them to re-assess their prospects and their perceptions of their status within the Russian Empire, and large numbers began to emigrate, primarily to the United States, but significant numbers also to the UK. Those who arrived in London found themselves quite out of place both culturally and religiously with the existing Jewish communities in the metropolis. Quite apart from the generally low level of observance of Jewish law in the established community, as compared to the higher level generally prevalent amongst the new arrivals, the style of synagogue service in London would have seemed totally alien to a Jew from the Pale of Settlement. Complicated choral works by the likes of Sulzer, Mombach and Lewandowski were something simply never heard by a Jew used to praying in a crowded *shtiebel*, with services chanted in a fervent but informal style by a local prayer-leader, and many who arrived at a choral service in the Great Synagogue or the New must have wondered whether they had entered a church by mistake. The cavernous, cathedral-like architecture of the large London synagogues would only have added to this impression.

The immediate and prevalent response to this clash of cultures was for the immigrant Jews to form their own communities and small synagogues along lines more familiar to them, and this was indeed done in great numbers throughout the East End of London. However, for the existing communities – who were generally rich in monetary wealth but poor in terms of Jewish knowledge and education – it was becoming more difficult to recruit cantors with the musical and vocal skills necessary to maintain the traditional Western Ashkenazi musical structure of their services. An obvious solution was for those communities to recruit cantors from amongst their Eastern European brethren, whose ranks included many highly skilled and vocally-gifted cantors. But this solution brought its own set of problems, because as has been noted previously, the art of the Eastern European cantor is quite unlike that of his Western European counterpart. An audio example will speak a thousand words to demonstrate this difference; the following is a recording by cantor Zevulun Kwartin – born 1874 in Chonorod, Russia – of the prayer *Haneshomoh Loch* (The soul is Yours and the body Yours) from the penitential *Selichos* prayers recited before the Jewish New Year. Note the heavy use of *Ahavoh Rabbah*, one of the non-Western *nussach* modes of Ashkenazi prayer, the virtuoso vocal acrobatics and operatic-style high notes, and the intense repetition of a single phrase of text, all of which are common features of the Eastern European

cantorial art.

Recording 9: Cantor Zevulun Kwartin with Solomon G. Braslavsky (Organ) – Haneshomoh Loch (Penitential service)

Whilst this example may seem extreme, I hope my audience will be left in no doubt how great the difference is between the two schools of Ashkenazi cantorial art, and how incongruous such a musical style would have seemed in the rarefied confines of one of London's cathedral synagogues, with a congregation more used to hearing the likes of Mombach and Verrinder.

Nevertheless, no community is an island, and it would not be too long before the Eastern style started to make its presence felt in even the most musically-conservative of the English synagogues, helped, no doubt, by the increasingly diverse membership of these congregations as they accepted members from the immigrant community. The case can be put very clearly by studying the 1913 appointment of Abraham Katz to the position of cantor at the Great Synagogue. The following account is written by Hermann Mayerowitsch, who acceded to the same pulpit in 1921:

'The election of the Rev. Mr. Katz to the Readership of the Great Synagogue followed a lively contest in which the only opposing candidate was Chazan [Cantor] David Steinberg of Odessa, Russia. It was, however, not a struggle of two equal candidates, but a conflict between two schools of thought. The so-called "foreign" elements in the congregation fought keenly for Steinberg, who was unquestionably a Chazan of great attainments. He seemed, as it were, to take heaven and the congregation by storm; technically, no doubt, a remarkable feat, but ethically and aesthetically a little startling to people born and educated in this country. To these people Steinberg's service appeared to be nothing more than an artistic performance. Mr. Katz, on the other hand, although born and brought up in Russia, had, through holding positions in Tirnau, near Vienna, and at Amsterdam, acquired the Western polish which he skilfully combined with the touching pathos and exuberance of Russia, with which he so much impressed the then Hon. Officers of the Great Synagogue.'

Thus we see the ways in which the liturgical music of Anglo-Jewry began very gradually to develop into the fusion of Western and Eastern styles which is still seen today. Mayerowitsch goes on:

'It must... be acknowledged that a great deal of Katz' success was due to the co-operation he had of that master of melody and contrapoint, Mr. Samuel Alman, then Choirmaster at the Great Synagogue, though Mr. Alman himself admitted to have found in Katz an admirable interpreter of his music, which he specially wrote for the Great Synagogue. As a result of this collaboration of Chazan and Choir the services at the Great Synagogue reached a musical standard I never heard anywhere else, and no wonder it attracted such large congregations.'

Mayerowitsch has helpfully introduced for me the next important figure who must be mentioned in a history such as this. Samuel Alman was born in 1877 in Sobolevka, Russia. He studied music in the Odessa and Kishinev conservatories and served for a time as a musician in the Russian army. But, as with so many others, it was witnessing the scenes of savagery during the infamous Kishinever pogrom of 1903 which convinced him that he had no future in Russia. He duly moved to London, continuing his studies at the Guildhall School of Music, and took up the post of Choirmaster at the Dalston synagogue, later the Great Synagogue, and finally in 1916 at Hampstead synagogue. His long and fruitful career encompassed many diverse musical activities, including choral societies, chamber music, theatre and even a grand opera in Yiddish, but he is certainly best remembered for his contribution to synagogue choral music. As a result of his early exposure to music in Russia, he was deeply influenced by the Eastern European school of

cantorial art, but his Western training in music theory enabled him to develop his own style of composition and arrangement for the English synagogue, whereby authentic Eastern-style solo vocal lines were harmonised in a sensitive way without destroying with the essential character of the cantorial elements.

Here is an extract from one of Alman's most famous compositions – *Hineni*, the introduction to performing the commandment of counting the Omer – the days between the Festivals of Passover and Pentecost.

Recording 10: Cantor Naftali Herstik and the Jerusalem Great Synagogue Choir under the direction of Elli Jaffe – Hineni (Alman)

In 1933 Alman was invited by the United Synagogue to prepare a new edition of the Blue Book, which included a large supplemental section of his own compositions and arrangements. It is in this version that the book continues to be used today by the handful of Ashkenazi synagogues in the UK which still have choirs, however the trend since the latter part of the 20th century has been for progressively decreasing formality in the services. The share of Anglo-Jewish families who are members of the United Synagogue has dropped significantly, to be replaced by an increased share for those more conservative religious organisations which represent the heirs to the Eastern European immigration of which we have already spoken, known colloquially as the 'Litvish' (Lithuanian) community. Their services favour an absolute minimum of melody, albeit with a strict adherence to the principles of *nussach* for the various different occasions of the Jewish year, but great vocal skill and musical talent beyond the accurate, basic rendition of the *nussach* is not generally valued, except on the odd special occasion. Those elements of congregational song which have crept in have tended to come not from the Western tradition – which is even to this day regarded in these communities as somewhat 'foreign' – but rather from the tradition of Chassidic song. The Chassidic community has represented an increasing proportion of the conservative Orthodox population in the UK since the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 led to an influx of – especially Satmar – Chassidic Jews fleeing hardship under Soviet rule. Constraints of time do not permit me to make more than a brief mention here of their significant musical contribution to synagogue song, but suffice to say that it has injected an element of joyous and upbeat congregational participation in the otherwise musically-plain Litvish service.

Within the United Synagogue itself, too, the tendency has been to eschew the formality of a Cantor and choir – again, except on special occasions, and in a handful of synagogues of a more conservative nature – in favour of lay service leaders and participatory music of a more modern character. A similar story can be told with regard to the Reform Movement.

Meanwhile, the Spanish & Portuguese congregation has been generally more successful in maintaining the unique musical character of its services, and especially their choral element. It too faced a changing demographic in the cultural background of Sephardi Jews in the UK in the middle of the 20th century, particularly during the 1950s, 60s and 70s as successive waves of Jewish immigrants arrived in the UK from Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and other Arab lands. Initially, many of these new arrivals joined the Spanish & Portuguese congregation, as being the only Sephardi congregation in the UK, even though the Western-style services must have seemed absolutely alien to them, coming from communities where the music was essentially Arabic in character, utilising a complex system of modes and tonalities based on *Maqam*. Later on, the trend tended to be that those who were not willing to subsume their own tradition in favour of the Spanish & Portuguese one formed their own smaller congregations – of which there are a number scattered across different areas of London, each maintaining the tradition of their ancestral community – whilst others who were happy to adopt the Spanish & Portuguese tradition remained members there, with the synagogue providing occasional alternative services for them in their own tradition, especially on the High Holidays.

In this way, the Spanish & Portuguese congregation has largely avoided what its members might regard as any adulteration of its historical musical traditions by foreign elements, with a tiny handful of exceptions. The most noticeable of these occurs on the Day of Atonement, during the *Selihot* – penitential prayers which are recited several times during the day. In the middle of the service, as the cantor reaches the words 'Adon Haselihot' (Master of forgiveness), the congregation invariably interrupts the flow of his traditional chant with the following melody, taken straight from the Syrian-Yerushalmi tradition.

Recording 11: Asher Sasho-Levy and ensemble Aram Soba – Adon Haselihot (Traditional Yerushalmi)

I hope my audience will forgive me if I end this lecture with an historical item not presented in strictly chronological order. One of the great musical figures in the history of Anglo-Jewry, whom I have not yet mentioned, is Reverend David Aaron de Sola, who was born in Amsterdam and was appointed Cantor at Bevis Marks in 1818. In addition to his many scholarly achievements and his editions of both the Sephardi and Ashkenazi prayer books, he published in 1857 a collection of notated melodies from the Spanish & Portuguese liturgical tradition. This volume is one of the earliest systematic publications of a Jewish musical tradition, and whilst de Sola's scholarly essay in the book claiming extreme antiquity for all of the melodies presented therein has raised a few eyebrows amongst modern musicologists, his one original composed melody presented in the volume – a tune for the poem Adon Olam (Master of the Universe) which closes the morning service on Sabbaths and Festivals – has gained enduring popularity. It was later edited by Alman and included in his edition of the Blue Book, and has since become a favourite with Jewish congregations of all hues, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, orthodox and non-orthodox, across the entire globe. It is perhaps, therefore, a fitting conclusion to this brief survey of the music of a community which, for all its variety of different forms, politics and aesthetics, has remained a consistent and influential part of this city's religious and cultural life for the last 365 years.

Recording 12: The Choir of The Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation under the direction of Jacob Hadida – de Sola's Adon Olam

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Suggestions for Further Reading

History of London Jewry:

Endelman, T., *The Jews of Britain 1656 – 2000*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2002

Hyamson, A. M., *The Sephardim of England: A History of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Community 1492 – 1951*, Methuen & Co, Ltd., London 1951

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Aguilar, E. and de Sola, D. A., *The Ancient Melodies of the Liturgy of The Spanish and Portuguese Jews*, Wertheimer and Co., London 1857



Edelman, M. B., *Discovering Jewish Music*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2003
Idelsohn, A. Z., *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York 1992