A. Z. IDELSOHN: A PIONEER IN JEWISH ETHNOMUSICOLOGY*

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In the beginning of the twentieth century, the study and research of Jewish music was motivated by the belief that the music of biblical times survived in the living traditions of Jewish communities. It was also believed that with the dispersion of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish music underwent a process of diversification and there remained only the variants without the central Theme. Restoring it to its former glory became the task which started the modern search after the true and most ancient sources of Jewish music.

The beginnings of the new research in this field take us back to the first two decades of our century, with the opening of the first Phonogram-Archives (in 1900) in Vienna and Berlin, under the guidance of such personalities as Carl Stumpf and Erich M. von Hornbostel, Curt Sachs, Robert Lachmann, Otto Abraham and others. Encouraged by the new possibilities of the Edison Phonograph with its mechanical recordings which provided the true image of any musical source, the real search started for the detection of the earliest "beginnings" of music**, with its many shades and functions in "low" human societies, at their sacred services and rituals. A new approach concerning the early phases of liturgical music in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism helped to discover the *living* Orient with its many Afro-Asiatic communities and ethnic groups.

As a research project, Jewish music does not allow such a clear view on its earliest beginnings, but has to be seen on the broader background of its many spiritual and musical contacts with the neighbouring cultures in the ancient East. Again and again we had to learn how to see ourselves in the image of others and to take from them the key for our own degrees of evolution.

The first decades of the twentieth century brought a great awakening of the humanities from their stale and often antiquarian existence. A number of great comprehensive books on the Gregorian Chant (Amédée Gastoué, Peter Wagner, etc.), of Byzantine Chant (Egon Wellesz), and on early Christian liturgies (Eric

* This is a revised version of the first part of "Two Anniversaries – Two Pioneers in Jewish Ethnomusicology," *Orbis Musicae*, II (1973/74): 17-18.

** See C. Stumpf, *Die Anfänge der Musik*, München, 1909; R. Wallaschek *Anfänge der Tonkunst*, Leipzig, 1903; Herman Smith, *The World's Earliest Music*, London, 1904.

Werner), together with modern archaeology have greatly contributed to our musical knowledge. Especially important was the revised approach to the history of liturgies under the imprint of Judaism and Jewish chant. Hellenism and Judaism, which kept apart through many centuries, met again in a lively interchange of ideas which at last recognized the new value of the non-Hellenic cantillation style.

At this historical junction, Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, the Jewish-Ashkenazi cantor from Latvia and one of the first ethnomusicologists in Jewish music, came to our help when he set forth for a systematic rehabilitation of Jewish music. In the absence of significant ancient notated sources, Idelsohn was able to provide oral documentation by the hundreds out of his treasure box of recorded or analyzed examples. The growth of the Gregorian Chant, for instance, cannot be perceived any longer as an independent invention of the Western Church, but must be seen as a manifestation deeply rooted in Central and Western Asia. Its reception by the Western Church necessitated a constant transformation and reform of the chant in order to keep it acceptable to European ears and to protect it from decadence.

In this paper we shall try to render a brief survey of Idelsohn's seminal works, following his musical thoughts and their realization in many a pioneering way. There is no doubt that it was given to him to lay the foundations of research in Jewish music.

Among Idelsohn's main achievements is the discovery of the importance of the Oriental Jewish communities, the recognition of their antiquity and the unique quality of their musical cultures; and consequently the extension of our knowledge of Jewish music beyond the confines of the European Ashkenazi traditions to include those of the Oriental Sephardi Jews. Idelsohn was among the first ethnomusicologists to collect and record systematically, and to consider the innate laws of tonality and melodic growth in oral traditions as seriously as those of written traditions. His musical-liturgical studies were complemented by investigations into related disciplines: Oriental dialects, poetry, linguistics; by comparative studies of Arab *maqām* techniques and instrumental forms; and, most important, by comparisons between ancient Hebrew and early Christian chant, Byzantine and Jacobite as well as Gregorian. Thanks to the *Hebräisch-orientalischer Melodienschatz* (*HOM*) with its thousands of specimens of liturgical chant and religious song as transcribed by Idelsohn, general musicology has been enriched by the discovery of many early interrelations between East and West, which were mostly unknown to European historiography before their publication. These include: the great similarity of Oriental Jewish intonations of scripture with those of Gregorian chant; parallel phenomena in ecphonetic notations; the Eastern origins of hymnody. On the other hand, it became evident that the

Jewish Bible cantillation and prayer tunes had, during centuries of exile, absorbed many foreign melody styles from the host countries. *HOM*, though open to criticism on some subjects, has remained the major reference work in Jewish music research. There is no need to emphasize that this collection has become the fountainhead of source materials for any further research in our time. We are even forced to admit that, with all our modern and sophisticated means of research, we have not been able to exceed the sheer quantity of Idelsohn's research materials. We have not even laid down the principles of a scientific technique of editing the accumulation of Jewish songs, which have meanwhile been recorded and stored away in the forlorn hope that a future giant may bring them back to life again, for use and further research.

After Idelsohn's death in 1938, Eric Werner was chosen as his successor in Cincinnati, placing the focus of his studies on the historical sources where Idelsohn left them, especially on the transitional periods from Temple to Synagogue, and the first centuries of Judeo-Christian syncretism.

At the same time, the ethnomusicological research in Jerusalem was taken over by Robert Lachmann who, during the years 1935-9 was in charge of the Phonogram-Archives at the Hebrew University at Jerusalem. At present, research is being carried on at the Jewish Music Research Centre of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and also at the Tel Aviv and Bar-Ilan universities.

It can safely be said that the successive phases of Idelsohn's personal development reflect contemporaneous situations in Jewish music research. One could even say that his personal development from an ordinary *ḥazzan* to a full-fledged musicologist – in fact, the first ethnomusicologist of Jewish music – gives us a clear indication of the state of music research as it was before, during, and after his career.

As the first exponent of the ethnographical approach to Jewish music, Idelsohn was also opposed to the conventional Eurocentric approach based on historical and rabbinical sources alone.

When Idelsohn began his scientific career, about 1900, musicology was still far from defining the precise distinction between the realms of the historical and the ethnic-traditional disciplines. In a sense, his own upbringing was an ideal background for his later research: on the one hand, his traditional training as a Jewish cantor perpetuated within himself the musical heritage of cantorial music, and on the other hand, his secular musical education at Western conservatories educated him as a modern composer and theoretician. This rare combination of knowledge, both of Eastern tradition and of Western discipline, helped to make him aware of the intricacies of oral traditions of music in the East, and the value of their ever-changing melodic course, as opposed to the immutability of composed art-music in the West.

As we, today, consider Idelsohn, and the work he carried out under the conditions which prevailed over eighty years ago, we can summarize his personal achievements in the following points:

He discovered the oral tradition as being of equal value with the written one. This was a major breakthrough: the negation of the conventional attitude which valued notated art-music based on historical theory above the so-called primitive music, which was considered to be living a kind of vegetative existence beyond the written control-systems.

The next question was: how to preserve this non-written musical folk-art? Here Idelsohn did not rely, as did many of his contemporaries, on the old tradition of learning by rote, but became one of the very first pioneers of the scientific system of mechanical recording of non-Western music by means of the (then) new Edison phonograph. Thus he became one of the first ethnomusicologists, travelling around with his heavy machine and his delicate perishable cylinders. At that time, because of the insufficiencies of mechanical recording and, on the other hand, the enormous extent of his collecting work, he could take only a limited number of samples in recorded form. Today, these early cylinders of his, preserving mostly Yemenite, Persian, Syrian and Babylonian (Iraqi) Jewish liturgies, constitute precious primary sources of those Oriental traditions in an incorruptible and authentic form.

A further point which is worthy of attention, is Idelsohn's classification system. As there was no scientific precedent for his experimental work, he had to discover for himself a new system of classification to fit the nature of Jewish song in each of the many communities which he saw as objects for his research. The common denominator turned out to be the Jewish liturgical year, which served as a general framework; and the different forms of cantorial music, which served as single species within this framework. This, then, was the final organization of the material, as he worked it out, at least for the first five volumes of *HOM* dealing with Oriental Jewry. Behind them lies the belief that Jewish music is more or less identical with liturgical music, or that the Jewish nature of music can only be detected in the innermost circle of its sacred melody. Today, therefore, we observe the omission of any kind of secular songs sung by the Jewish people, any kind of folk songs, epic songs, dances, instrumental music, women's songs, children's songs. Here is an indication of what we could and should do, in order to complement his recordings. But still the question remains: where shall we look for the true and undiluted expression of Jewish song? No doubt, the world of musical liturgy, especially of biblical cantillation, psalm reading, hymnology, and prayer-tunes, will always remain the nucleus of Jewishness in music. But in order to bring into relief the realities of community life, with its colourful traditional feasts and customs, we must fill in the rest of the musical forms, even if

they rely partly on the musical cultures of the host countries. Taking the indigenous and the foreign elements together, we may now begin to develop a better, more true-to-life picture of the Oriental communities.

A further achievement of far-reaching importance was Idelsohn's discovery of the Jewish Orient, that is to say, the discovery of the Asian and North African Jewish communities. Today it is difficult to realize that, at one time, Ashkenazi Judaism was the exclusive subject of historical, theological, and sociological study, and of more specific research into communal traditions, rituals, usages, folk literature, and folk music. Thus Jewish folk song was, simply Yiddish folk song, Jewish dances were mainly hassidic dances; and there was no stronger contrast available than that between the Western and the Eastern Ashkenazi traditions. For a Jew from Frankfurt or Mainz, it was an experience of exoticism in music to listen to a Jewish folk song from the Ukraine or Bessarabia. Even in the early years of our century, the physical existence, as well as the cultural traditions, of Jewish communities from Yemen, Bagdad, Teheran, Meshed, Kairouan, Fez, or Marrakesh, were largely unknown. It was mainly Idelsohn's personal pilgrimage to Erez Israel and his prolonged sojourn in Jerusalem (1906-21) that brought him face to face with what were then small communities of Oriental Jews, living in their closed quarters in Jerusalem. Daily contact with them, and a growing awareness of the specific variants of their traditions, opened within him a new view of the enormous, almost world-wide diffusion of Jewish traditions in liturgical music. His trained cantor's ear was of no small help to him in distinguishing the many differences of style, but also in detecting the existence of trends common to them all.

A by-product of Idelsohn's musical research was the collection of the literary treasures of Oriental poems of which he published a comprehensive collection together with W. H. Torczyner (*Diwan of Hebrew and Arabic Poetry of the Yemenite Jews*, 1930). Similarly, he did not stop at collecting melodies and poems, but also began to utilize the modern method of mechanical recording for acoustical and phonetic research. The fruit of this work was the publication of his *Phonographierte Gesänge und Aussprachsproben des Hebräischen, der Jemenitischen, Persischen und Syrischen Juden* (1917). This treatise in itself represents a completely new step in the direction of musical dialectography, and may prove to be a new point of departure.

This led to the discovery that the melodic dialects in the melodic-oral traditions of the Jewish communities all over the world have their bases in specific Hebrew dialects. At the same time, the parallelism of lingual and musical formations presupposes a common source of speech and melody in human expression.

This directs our attention to his new method of comparison between the styles of the many far-flung communities - as, for instance, the rather surprising similarity that he found between Hispanic and Slavonic melody, or between old French and Jewish songs.

Behind this comparative research lays his basic conviction that there exists a kind of "*Urlinie*", a binding single melody for all the Jewish liturgies, the origin of which should go back to pre-exile times.

Apart from this comparative method, another significant discovery appeared in the background: the similarity of melodies was, apparently, not so much based on the note-to-note conformity of melodies in oral traditions, as on the conformity of more complex characters of melody or models of tunes, which may be the same without being strictly identical. In other words, Idelsohn had now made his acquaintance with the principle of *maqām* in traditional Persian and Arabic art music. The awareness of the *maqām* idea, which turned out to be one of his most revolutionary insights, put Jewish music into the mainstream of Asian musics and showed that it shared the general attitude toward musical expression that constitutes the heritage of the rest of the Oriental peoples.

This also meant correcting, little by little, the opinion which prevailed at that time: that the sacred music of Jewish tradition must also be the purest style of Jewish music. The fact that foreign elements, mainly Arab and Persian, had long since been absorbed, even into the realm of liturgical music, was a new datum which had to be slowly accepted by Jewish musicologists. At the beginning of our century, the first modern treatises on the theory of the *maqām* appeared, written by Arab musicians. The most significant among them were the books by Darwish Muhammad, Michel Meschaqa, and especially that by Muhammad Kamel el-Kholay. In the fourth volume of *HOM*, which has as its subject the music of the Oriental Sephardi Jews, Idelsohn added a comprehensive article on Arab music, based on the works of the above mentioned authors. This article remains to this day a basic contribution to the whole question of *maqām*. Accordingly, we were forced to assimilate a new fact: that even the inner circles of Jewish liturgy were more often than not of a composite nature, i.e. they had, besides their traditional elements, also absorbed some historical foreign elements of art-music, such as the technique of *maqām* together with its processes of composition.

To the same extent that Idelsohn detected remnants of Oriental music in cantorial Jewish music, he was also able to detect many remnants of European music, both folk and art, which had been synthesized with the ancient stream of Jewish chant.

These and many more results of Idelsohn's indefatigable researches into the nature and history of Jewish music finally led to a result which not only astonished Jewish musicians and researchers, but which also provoked the

interest of Gentile musicologists. In his article entitled "Parallels between Gregorian and Hebrew Oriental Chant" (1921/2) Idelsohn was able to tell the world of a far-reaching discovery he had made as a result of his comparative studies. This was the great similarity between early Christian chant and Jewish cantillation as it had been preserved by the ancient Jewish communities, especially those of Asia: Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Persia. This led him to the conviction that the whole apparatus of early Western liturgy was nothing more than an offspring of the prior tradition of Jewish musical liturgy in ancient Israel. The article appeared at a time when most histories of music were still treating Western Medieval music as rooted in Greek music culture, with its highly developed theory and philosophy of music and its wealth of written documents. Here, then, a completely new point of departure was proposed, based on nothing but the evidence of an oral tradition – and even that not unified but broken up into the myriad of local variants or diaspora-styles of today, which are separated from the historical facts by nearly two thousand years. Apart from the boldness of the scientific procedure itself, i.e. the confrontation of a historically grown species like Gregorian chant, and a purely ethnological phenomenon: modern recordings of the Bible-cantillations of present-day Jewish communities. Since then, some fifty years have elapsed, and Idelsohn's thesis has been generaly accepted – naturally, with some corrections as to the precise nature of the ancient means of transmission, and the alterations which followed the new spirituality of the Church.

Today, almost fifty years after his death, we must admit that much remains to be done in order to reclaim even a small part of the enormous scientific output that Idelsohn has left us. To this day, no one has undertaken the direct continuation of his monumental work. Jewish musicology has turned to more specific research into single small items, and to a kind of micro-anaylsis of them, which in itself precludes the production of major anthologies of communal music.

Idelsohn's lesser-known works on the periphery of Jewish music – on the Arab *maqām* system, on the Jacobite chant, on the Samaritan cantillation symbols – seem to be of equal importance today, as are his comparative analyses of the influence of the diaspora-environment on Jewish music and vice versa. Many of his works still await utilization, correction and amplification.

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