

London Concord Singers
conductor - Malcolm Cottle

400 Years of Jewish Music

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Wednesday 18th July 2001

Programme

Schubert Tov L'hodot (Psalm 92) D953
Kurt Weill Kiddush
Salomone De Rossi from Hashirim Asher Lish'lomo (The Songs of Solomon)
Haleluya. Ashrei ish yare et Adonai (Psalm 112)
Al naharot Bavel (Psalm 137)
Sir Hamma'a lot. B'shur Adonai (Psalm 126)
Ein keloheinu

Interval

Aldema 3 Folk Songs
Bernstein from Chichester Psalms
2 - Psalm 23; Psalm 2, vs. 1-4;
3 - Psalm 131; Psalm 133, vs. 1;
Emmanuel Fisher Shomreini El (Psalm 16)
Ernest Bloch from Avodath Hakodesh (Sacred Service)
Adon Olam
Benediction

Salomone Rossi (c.1570-c.1630)

Hashirim Asher Lish'lomo (The Songs of Solomon)

In 1623 the publishing house of Bragadini in Venice published a volume of motets. Unique at the time and destined to remain so for another 200 years, it consisted of polyphonic settings by Salomone Rossi of Psalms and Hymns. But these were not Latin motets for church use, these were Hebrew motets destined for use in a synagogue. The title of the collection, *Hashirim Asher Lish'lomo (The Songs of Solomon)* is a play on words referring to both the title of the biblical book of love songs and the first name of the composer. Though a bold innovation for the synagogue, the work does not differ greatly from the conventions of early Baroque music. Like contemporary collections of sacred music, it contained a variety of liturgical forms. The thirty-three motets, set for from three to eight voice parts, include psalms, hymns and prayers for the Sabbath and holiday services (or for concerts of sacred music) and one wedding ode.

In accordance with the practice of Hebrew printing, each part book opened from right to left. The entire introductory text is in Hebrew apart from the name of the publisher in Italian. The following is a sample from the tenor part book. The text underlying the notes is in the original Hebrew notation rather than a transliteration. The placing of this text presented a problem for the printer since music is read from left to right but Hebrew is read from right to left. This was one of the first printed attempts to co-ordinate Hebrew with music in Western notation. The printer's solution was to align the first letter of each word with the last note to which it was set, leaving the singer to decide how to allocate individual syllables to notes. The difficulties and ambiguities inherent in the practice seem to suggest that the motets were sung with one voice to a part.



That the music was printed using Hebrew text (rather than a transliteration) indicates Rossi intended the motets for a Jewish congregation and that there were sufficient musically literate Jews in the Mantuan Ghetto.

In all the motets, clarity of text is paramount. Following synagogue convention (and in contrast to contemporary practice) words are rarely repeated. So that the words could be readily understood, Rossi sets them mainly homophonically, using imitative polyphony as points of contrast. Again this in contrast to the prevailing style of mainly imitative polyphony with homophonic sections used for contrast. Rossi must have been aware of the musical reforms in the Catholic church which were affecting the composition of church music. The homophonic texture was ideal for conveying the meaning of text and Rossi's work contrasts interestingly with Lodovico Viadana's experiments in Sacred Monody, also in Mantua.

Rossi's preface to the collection includes a remarkable copyright notice, the first of its kind protecting the rights of a composer.

We have agreed to the reasonable and proper request of the worthy and honoured Master Salamone Rossi of Mantua who has become by his painstaking labours the first man to print Hebrew music. He has laid out a large disbursement which has not been provided for, and it is not proper that anyone should harm him by reprinting similar copies or purchasing them from a source other than himself. Therefore we the undersigned decree by the authority of the angels and the word of the holy ones, invoking the curse of the serpent's bite, that no Israelite, wherever he may be, may print the music contained in this work in any manner, in whole or in part, without the permission of the above mentioned author Let every Israelite hearken and stand in fear of being entrapped by this ban and curse. And those who hearken will dwell in confidence and ease, abiding in blessing under the shelter of the Almighty. Amen

Salomone Rossi was active at the court of the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua at the beginning of the 17th Century. He was a freelance violinist and composer. In the 16th and 17th Century, the court of the Gonzagas at Mantua was a glittering affair, the seat of royal luxury and artistic magnificence. At the beginning of the 17th century, the composers Monteverdi, Gastoldi, Rossi, Wert and Viadana provided the most fashionable new music for banquets, wedding feasts, musical-theatre productions and chapel services. Jews were not only tolerated, but they were often allowed to intermingle freely with non-Jews. In this liberal atmosphere, Jews were affected inevitably by the prevailing literary, artistic and humanistic tendencies.

Some of Mantua's most famous dancers and choreographers were Jews. For a one-hundred-year period, starting in the middle of the 16th century, there was an active Jewish Theatre troupe in Mantua, known as the Università Israelitica. The citizens of Mantua were all aware of the Università's unusual schedule: on Fridays performances would be held in the afternoon rather than in the evening, so as not to interfere with the festa del sabbato. While originally devised for the entertainment of Jews by Jews, this troupe received frequent invitations from the Gonzaga dukes to perform for Christian audiences in the palace. The success of this troupe at its height can be attributed to three of its leaders: the playwright Leone Sommo, the choreographer Isaaco Massarano, and Salamone Rossi.

Very little is known about Rossi, but he was born in about 1570 and died in about 1630. His published works consist of 6 books of madrigals, one book of duets, one book of canzonets, four books of instrumental works, a single balletto and the book of Hebrew motets. Much of his music possesses great charm and in many ways he was in the avant garde. He was the first madrigal composer to favour the mannerist poets, his first book of madrigals was published with an unprecedented entablature for a Chitarrone. His second book of Madrigals was in the vanguard of the experiments with accompanied monody as it was published with a basso continuo part, three years before Monteverdi's first concerted madrigals. Rossi was similarly innovative in his instrumental music. So we should perhaps not be surprised that he published an innovative book of motets in Hebrew, intended for use in his synagogue. Despite the protection of the Duke of Mantua, Rossi was never completely assimilated into the Christian community surrounding him. On the title page of the book of Hebrew motets he is described as Salamone Rossi Hebreo. He participated in the Jewish theatre troupe and a Jewish instrumental ensemble as well as in Mantuan court life. Though his book of motets draws on his knowledge of contemporary church music, the Hebrew motets remained his only liturgical music.

There was some controversy at the time about whether polyphonic settings were welcome in the Jewish temple. Since the beginning of the last diaspora, the Jews had clung to ancient and exotic musical tradition. Instruments were banned from the synagogue as a sign of mourning for the destruction of the ancient Bet HaMikdash. New melodies of gentile origin were considered a deviation from the pure Near-Eastern tradition, and, as such, were forbidden. Change was frowned upon; prayer tunes were kept in their original form; no harmonisation was allowed. But times were changing. In Padua and Ferrara there were synagogue choirs at the end of the 16th century. In Modena there was an organ, in Venice a complete orchestra. Flaunting the centuries-old tradition, these practices came under heavy criticism from many conservative members of the community.

In the year 1630 Mantua was stormed by invading Austrian troops. The Jewish ghetto was ravaged and its inhabitants fled the town. The Renaissance was over for the Jewish community. Choral music was no longer heard in the synagogue. Salamone Rossi probably died in that year and was all but forgotten.

Franz Schubert (1797 - 1828)

Tov L'hodot (Psalm 92)

The beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed the exodus of the Jewish community from the confines of the ghetto into the mainstream of European cultural and intellectual life. As a result, synagogue worship service underwent some drastic changes, as Jews sought to reflect the artistic developments in the work around them.

In 1826, Salomon Sulzer was appointed to the office of hazzan (cantor) of the Seitenstettengasse Temple in Vienna. Although trained in the musical composition, the young Sulzer had decided to dedicate his life to the Jewish ministry after being rescued from a drowning accident. His voice and emotional yet dignified style of performing were legendary. Franz Liszt wrote in 1859:

'In Vienna we know the famous tenor Sulzer, who served in capacity of precentor in the synagogue, and whose reputation is so outstanding... We went into the synagogue to hear him. For moments we could penetrate into his real soul and recognize the secret doctrines of the fathers. Seldom were we so deeply stirred by emotion as on that evening, so shaken that our soul was entirely given over to meditation and to participation in the service.'

Today Sulzer's fame rests less on the memories of his singing than on his harmonisation of the traditional liturgy and composition of new works in the style of the classical and early romantic Viennese school. This represented quite a departure from the ancient cantorial traditions of monophonic (solo) improvisations on Middle-Eastern modes in an unmeasured style!

Between 1840 and 1866 Sulzer published his liturgical compositions and arrangements in a monumental opus entitled *Schir Zion* (The Songs of Zion). This innovative work contained music for the complete liturgical year composed by Sulzer himself as well as 37 commissions from some of the best known Viennese composers of the day, including Franz Schubert, Ignaz von Seyfried, and Joseph Drechsler. The services in Vienna were very influential and Sulzer's innovations soon imitated throughout Western Europe.

At the request of Sulzer, Schubert composed his setting of Psalm 92 in the summer of 1828, the last year of Schubert's life. This is Schubert's only setting of Hebrew. We have little way of knowing exactly what Schubert was working on at this time, though parts of the *Schwanengesang* are dated August 1828. A number of other religious works also date from this period and it has been suggested that he may have been looking to church music as a future source of income, perhaps even a Kapellmeister post.

Sulzer sang the imposing baritone solo in the central section of the work. It is very straightforward in style, alternating statements by the solo quartet with those of the chorus in the outer sections, the chorus supporting the cantorial solo in the middle portion. The style is that of Schubert's late works, but echoes of the synagogue can be discerned. One can only imagine what fruits this relationship might have borne had Schubert lived beyond the year of this first collaboration. It is a beautiful piece which deserves to be better known.

Ernest Bloch (1880 - 1959)

Avodath Hakodesh (Sacred Service)

Ernest Bloch, the creator of music of great spiritual expression, was born in Geneva in 1880. His father was a clock maker and merchant. Bloch studied violin and composition in Geneva and went on to study in Brussels with Ysaye and in Frankfurt, where he studied with Iwan Knorr who had a strong influence on the composer's musical personality. He was prolific as a student and young composer and his opera *Macbeth* was produced at the Opera Comique in Paris in 1910. In 1916 he was engaged to conduct a concert tour of the USA and this marked a turning point in his life.

The success of his *Trois Poems Juifs*, premiered in 1917 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, encouraged him to settle in the United States. He soon assumed the directorship of the Cleveland Institute of Music and later the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. He died in Oregon in 1959.

"It was primarily the Jewish legacy which moved me, and music was the result. I have no idea to what degree this music is Jewish or simply Ernest Bloch. Only the future will be able to decide." - Ernest Bloch

Bloch appropriated both established and novel musical elements into highly dramatic scores which were often influenced by philosophical, poetic, or religious themes. His works range in style from late romanticism and impressionism to neo-classicism and even dodecaphony, but he is probably best known today as a Jewish composer and about a quarter of his output consists of works on a consciously Jewish theme. This group includes *Schelomo- A Hebrew Rhapsody* which is probably his best known work. Bloch's pupil Roger Sessions praised him for his special ability to express "the grandeur of human suffering."

"I am Jewish and strive to write Jewish music, this does not mean I have to use Jewish folk tunes but I have an authentic Jewish feeling inside of me. This feeling is, of course, buried at the root of all my serious music, and serves as a faithful expression both of the Jewish people as a whole, and of the individual Jew" - Ernest Bloch

The *Sacred Service (Avodath Hakodesh)* dates from 1930-1933. In 1927, whilst Director of the San Francisco Conservatoire, Bloch started considering a Jewish service. He was commissioned to write a Sabbath Morning Service for the Reform congregation in San Francisco, with a text based upon the American Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship. Bloch started the process of composition by doing studies in 16th century two-part counterpoint, and by studying the Hebrew text (alongside translations into French and English). The text, taken from the Psalms, Deuteronomy, Exodus, Isaiah, Proverbs and post-Biblical writings, provides the formal framework for the whole work. There are 5 parts and each is divided into a number of sections, preceded or linked by orchestral preludes or interludes which represents congregational meditation. Tonight we are singing two sections from part V, *Adov Alom* and the final Benediction, in the version for choir and organ.

Kurt Weill (1900 – 1950)

Weill displayed musical talent early on. By the time he was twelve, he was composing and mounting concerts and dramatic works in the hall above his family's quarters in the Gemeindehaus. During the First World War, the teenage Weill was conscripted as a substitute accompanist at the Dessau Court Theater.

A commission from the Baden-Baden Music Festival in 1927 led to the creation of *Mahagonny (Ein Songspiel)*, Weill's first collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, whose poetry had captured Weill's imagination, suggesting a compatible literary and dramatic sensibility. Exploiting their aggressive popular song-style, Weill and Brecht also created several works for singing actors in the commercial theatre. Increasingly uncomfortable with Brecht's restriction of the role of music in his political theatre, Weill then turned to other collaborators, the famous stage designer Caspar Neher and the distinguished playwright Georg Kaiser.

His later works outraged the Nazis. Riots broke out at several performances and carefully orchestrated propaganda campaigns discouraged productions of his works. In March 1933, Weill fled Germany, after periods in Paris and London, settled in the United States. Here he collaborated with such writers as Ira Gershwin, Alan Lerner and Ogden Nash to produce a successful sequence of Broadway musicals.

Weill was raised in a religious Jewish family. Although he was not observant, he composed a number of "Jewish" works, from a vast score to *The Eternal Road* (1937, Franz Werfel) to a setting of the Kiddush. *Kiddush* (The Prayer of Sanctification) was composed in 1946 for tenor solo, chorus, and organ, Kiddush was commissioned by the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York, where it was first performed during a Friday night service by Cantor David Putterman. The melody and arrangement is cabaret style. Weill dedicated the score to his father Albert, who survived the Second World War and became a citizen of the new state of Israel.

Leonard Bernstein (1918 - 1990) Chichester Psalms

The *Chichester Psalms* was Leonard Bernstein's first composition after the *Third Symphony, Kaddish* (composed for the Boston Symphony Orchestra's seventy-fifth anniversary, though not completed until 1963, eight years after that event). Both works add to the orchestra a chorus singing texts in Hebrew. But where the *Kaddish Symphony* is a work often at the edge of despair, the *Chichester Psalms* is serene and affirmative. It is also for the most part strongly tonal, the result of months of work during a sabbatical leave (in 1964-1965) from Bernstein's post as music director of the New York Philharmonic, during which time he wrote a great deal of twelve-tone music, but finally discarded it. "It just wasn't my music; it wasn't honest."

During his sabbatical leave he nurtured grand compositional plans. Along with choreographer Jerome Robbins and lyricists Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Bernstein had acquired rights to make a musical play of Thornton Wilder's 'The Skin of Our Teeth'. They worked for six months, but nothing resulted, to Bernstein's great disappointment. He also spent time in consultation, with Robbins and Arthur Laurents, about turning Bertolt Brecht's 'The Exception and the Rule' into a musical, but nothing came of that either. Bernstein's eagerness to resume his career as a theatre composer would find no outlet until *Mass* in 1971.

In fact *Chichester Psalms* was Bernstein's only completed work during the sabbatical. The commission came from Dr. William Hussey, dean of Chichester Cathedral, which had regular music festivals with choirs from Winchester and Salisbury Cathedrals. Hussey described available choral and instrumental forces to Bernstein in a letter, and noted that "many of us would be delighted if there was a hint of West Side Story about the music." Bernstein's inclusion in *Chichester Psalms* of music removed from *West Side Story* and the aborted *The Skin of Our Teeth* lent the work a Broadway sound. Bernstein admitted this to Hussey in a letter in May 1965: "It is quite popular in feeling . . . and it has an old-fashioned sweetness along with its more violent moments."

Chichester Psalms is harmonically one of Bernstein's simplest works, a result of his failed experiments with twelve-tone music. Bernstein admitted the work's tonal simplicity, describing it in his poetic sabbatical report to The New York Times:

*The Psalms are a simple and modest affair,
Tonal and tuneful and somewhat square,
Certain to sicken a stout John Cager
With its tonics and triads in E-flat major.*

The second movement is the set's most theatrical conception, with the peace of Psalm 23 interrupted by Psalm 2's angry 'Why do the nations rage.' The ideas are combined in the third section. The other-worldly opening melody was originally written with Betty Comden and Adolph Green for *The Skin of Our Teeth* as the song 'Spring will Come Again' It is sung by boy alto or countertenor, accompanied by harp. The music originally from the 'Prologue' of *West Side Story* forms the central section of this movement. It is marked 'Allegro feroce,' but is metrically more regular and less dissonant than the 'Prologue'. The two main ideas of the movement are combined, with blues melodic references remaining in the Psalm 23 melody.

Anthony Burton, Bernstein's biographer, was amazed that Bernstein found Psalm texts that fit his earlier music so well: "By a combination of significant coincidence, minor miracle, and sheer good luck, he found appropriate texts to match the rhythms of Comden and Green's Broadway-oriented lyrics." Considering that the texts Bernstein "managed" to find are amongst the most famous passages in all of the Psalms, it would seem that he did some rewriting to make the texts fit.

Gil Aldema (1928 -) Three Folksongs

Emmanuel Fisher Shomreini El

Emanuel Fisher is London's foremost Jewish composer. He was born into a family of singers; his father was a semi-professional singer and all his seven brothers were also singers. He was a boy soloist at what was then the UK's premier synagogue in Dukes Place (destroyed during the 2nd World War). He later sang as soloist at the Jewish Theatre in London's East End. Manny conducted England's most celebrated Jewish Choir - the London Jewish Male Choir - for 20 years, composing and arranging many pieces for them, and toured with them to the USA, Ireland and Israel as well as all over the UK. He provided and directed the choir for the Barbara Streisand film 'Yentel'. He has been a synagogue choirmaster for 40 years, currently at the West Hampstead Synagogue. In addition to his Jewish compositions, he has written a quantity of other music, including most recently a cycle of 10 poems by the French poet, Paul Verlaine. He also wrote a setting of the Latin "Ave Maria" for the choir of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Cadogan Street Chelsea, which they first performed at Latin Mass in 1998.