

ORBIS MUSICAE

VOL. X

ISSN 0303—3937

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THOUGHTS ON THREE VERSIONS OF *HASHKIVENU*

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As part of a three-year study of the American cantorate which I directed,¹ Max Wohlberg was interviewed several times. Wohlberg's longtime teaching position at the Cantors Institute (Jewish Theological Seminary) has made him a major force in the molding of younger American-trained cantors, and his experience and insight earn him the title of doyen of American cantorial music. Giving graciously of his time and knowledge, Wohlberg elucidated many points of interest and, in a final session, consented to sing a sample of improvised sacred song. We requested he concentrate on *Hashkivenu*, since several other cantors interviewed had spoken to that focal night prayer. Not only did Wohlberg oblige, but, somewhat to his own surprise, he offered three spontaneous versions, each quite different. The present article uses this material for modest commentary on the structural principles of cantorial improvisation in the spirit of Hanoach Avenary's work.² A broader account of the concept of *nusah* and the nature of improvisation as understood in America today can be found in my book-length study (Slobin 1989). The Wohlberg variants demonstrate the viability of *hazzanut* as an improvisatory art in the United States at the end of the 20th century, a fact which emerged from sampling not only a few veterans but a cross-section of 93 cantors of all ages and backgrounds.³

In his pioneering study, "The Cantorial Fantasia," Hanoach Avenary (1968) expressed the view that "the art of improvising a Fantasia...took refuge in Eastern Europe," and suggested further research on *hazzanut* in Eastern realms. In a preliminary way, I would like to address three points

1. The grant (1/1/84-6/30/87) was from the National Endowment for the Humanities to the Cantors Assembly; I also had sabbatical time from Wesleyan University.

2. I am grateful to Max Wohlberg for permission to cite his unplanned performances. The interview was conducted by Louis Weingarden in April, 1987.

3. I should point out that the sample includes only Ashkenazic, largely Eastern European professional cantors, so does not stand for the entire range of improvisation by full- and part-time cantors of all communal backgrounds in the United States.

Avenary raised in his article, using the Wohlberg material as an example of more general trends. Two are stylistic and one is what he calls “semantic.” The first points out that the cantorial fantasia is “of its nature melismatic” and “is composed of single themes each of which is a closed unit, and the composition itself is a string of such self-sufficient members.” The second proposes that “a full review of the ornamental element in cantorial song demands a separate effort of investigation,” while the third states that “the uncovering of the spiritual foundations of specific cantorial singing habits is a task as yet almost untouched.” I can take only a couple of steps along the path Avenary has pointed out, concentrating on the compositional process as implied by the structure of three successive settings of the same prayer.

Briefly put, my approach is to imagine an improvised version of a set text as a set of choices about how to combine the parameters of performance to project the singer’s conception of the spiritual essence of the words. The choices made created a series of rather free-standing segments of text (Avenary’s “closed units”). While the range of possible combinations is not broad, it yields a striking variety of patterns in a kaleidoscopic manner. I will concentrate on just five parameters of performance, listed in Fig. 1 for the three Wohlberg variants of *Hashkivenu*: 1) length of segment (where the “final word” of segment falls, which involves the decision of how to mark off units of text; 2) tonal orientation, dealing with internal relationships of pitches within a segment; 3) “rhythmic type,” or basic rhetorical approach to expounding the text (discussed in more detail below); 4) degree of ornamentation, concentrating only on how melismatic a segment is; and 5) location of highest pitch level.⁴ As Figure 1 shows, I feel all three variants consist of five segments, labeled A through E; of course, all such decisions are arbitrary, but there is no question that the singer thinks of the overall text setting as having distinct, differentiated units, as discussion with Wohlberg and other cantors shows. Figure 2 is the text of *Hashkivenu* for

4. Of course, there are many other parameters, such as intensity, to be considered in a thorough analysis.

reference, taken from the standard Conservative prayerbook Wohlberg's students use. An analysis of each parameter follows:

1. Length of segment. Within an apparently understood notion of five segments, the variants do not agree at all as to their boundaries. Thus, 1 and 2 agree on segment A's end, but not segment B's cadence, whereas 2 and 3 end B at the same place. Variant 1 ends C where variant 3 ends D, and so forth.

2. Tonality. Without getting into the vexed discussion of the tonal orientation ("modes?") of liturgical music, it is safe to say that the segments do tend to have obvious tonal axes. Broadly put, it is clear that the natural minor and what cantors call *frigish* (featuring the g-a flat-b-c tetrachord) predominate, but, surprisingly, variant 2 ends in a strongly declaimed major. Within segments, there may be some shifting, exemplified twice by an opening in *frigish* and closing in minor.

Worth a closer look is the distribution of this narrow range of possibilities within the overall pattern of a setting. Here we find no agreement at all among the three variants, underscoring the universal remark made by many cantors interviewed that tonal orientation is important only at the end of prayer texts, not at the beginning or in the middle, since the piece "must end in the proper *nusah*." However, even the ending is not uniform here, illustrating the cantors point that some items in the flow of a given service are more "nusach-bound" than others.

3. Degree of melisma. Another arena for choice is how heavily ornamented a segment can be. There seem to be three possibilities: non-melismatic, occasionally melismatic, and heavily melismatic. As before, the distribution of choices across a variant differs markedly from setting to setting, showing no clear preference.

4. Location of highest pitch level. In the interview, before singing Wohlberg suggested that *Hashkivenu* should start moderately, rise to an emotional high point, then subside, suggesting an arched contour:

"An analysis of the text will show us that the *Hashkivenu* consists of at least 4 elements. One is the introductory, where one introduces the *Hashkivenu* lyrically or otherwise, number 2 where the emotional element will come to the fore and is sort of a climax... number 3 element would be where I would leave this warm spirited element and go back to the original style of introduction or just calm down, a diminuendo from the excessive emotion; finally the conclusion, the ending..."

So the location of the highest pitch level is of some interest to us. While variant 2 suggests the arch contour, 1 doubles the arch (two high points), while 3 has both a midpoint and final surge, belying Wohlberg's own generalization.

5. Rhythmic type. What I mean by this term is a group of four "mindsets" about rhythmic orientation frequently found in my large corpus of improvised text settings. Briefly, I feel these embody the singer's notion of the rhetoric of performance: how to convey the meaning of a sacred text to the congregation. One is what I call a "reciting" style, which features no melisma and frequent strings of syllables on the same pitch. A second is "parlando-rubato," using Bela Bartok's term for folksong performance. This implies an elastic rhythmic sense ("rubato") combined with a strong interest in text projection ("parlando"). The third possibility incorporates pitches underscoring the singer's interest in calling attention to a certain phrase of the prayer. The fourth approach is the use of metric tunes to organize passages of text.

Wohlberg uses all four rhythmic types, with just a bit more consistency than for the other parameters cited above, perhaps indicating that the rhetoric of text presentation is a paramount parameter. In our three variants, the declamatory seems reserved for endings and the metric for middle sections. Still, what cantors call a *lidl* (metric tune) falls in two different places, showing the singer's freedom to decide where to introduce this approach even within a general sense of its appearing neither at the beginning nor at the end of a text setting.

Having surveyed five of the basic parameters of performance, we can step back a bit to view the larger picture, approaching, albeit tentatively, Avenary's question of the "spiritual significance" of the cantorial fantasia, or what cantors call a cantorial "recitative." Wohlberg himself supplies a good point of departure here:

"Since the musical elements of the recitative consist of a limited number of motifs and their variations... it is in their selection, combination and emphasis that the individuality of the [cantor] composer appears. Thus, the recitatives of Kwartin are pleading, those of Rosenblatt are melodic, Roitman's are intricately plaintive" (Wohlberg 1979, 85).

I find this area of rhetorical presentation of the text setting particularly suggestive in understanding how cantors construct their

Variant 2

	A	B	C	D	E
Final word of segment	<i>shlomekha</i>	<i>shemekha</i>	<i>raham atah</i>	<i>shlomekha</i>	
Tonality	minor	minor	frigish/ minor	minor	major
Rhythmic type	p-r	p-r	p-r	metric hint	declama- tory
melismatic?	no	medium	no	no	no
highest range			!		

Variant 3

	A	B	C	D	E
Final word of segment	<i>lehayim</i>	<i>shemekha</i>	<i>tastirenu</i>	<i>raham atah</i>	
Tonality	frigish	frigish	minor	minor	frigish/ minor
Rhythmic type	p-r	p-r	p-r	metric	reciting/ declama- tory
melismatic?	medium	strong	strong	no	strong
highest range			!		!

lom me'a-tah (-tah)
 ve-ad o-lam u-fe-ros a-le-nu suk-kat she-lo-me-kha
 Bo-rukht a-tah a-do-nai ha-po-res suk-kat sha-lom a-le-nu
 ve-al kol a-ma yis-ro-el ve-al ye-ru-sha-la-yim.

VERSION 2

time: 4'24"

A slowly
 Hash-ki-ve-nu a-do-nai e-lo-he-nu le-sha-lom
 ve-ha-mi-de-nu mal-ke-nu le-ha-yim
B quicker
 U-fros a-le-nu suk-kat shlo-me-kha ve-tak-ne-nu ve-ei-
slower
 zah to-vah mil-fo-ne-kha ve-ho-shi'e-nu
C loudly
 le-man she-me-kha ve-hag-gen ba-de-nu
 ve-ha-ser me'a-le-nu o-ye-v
 de-ver ve-he-rev ve-ra'av ve-ya-gon
 ve-ha-ser sa-tan mil-fo-ne-nu u-mi-a-ha-re-nu

nu le - ma - 'an le-man shei- me - kha ve- hag
 gen ba - 'a - de - nu ve - ha -
 ser (-ser) me - 'a - le - nu
 o - o - yev ve - he -
 re - re - rev ve - ra - 'av
 ve - yo - gon ve - ha - ser sa - tan
 mil - fo - - -
 mil - fo - ne - nu u - me - a - ha - re - e - nu
 u - ve - zel ke - na - fe - kha ta - sti - re - nu.
 D *quicker, metric, still loud*
 ki el shom - re - nu u - ma - zi - le - nu u - ma - zi - le - nu a - tah
 ki el me - lekh ha - nun ve - ra - hum a - tah.
 E
 u - she - mor ze - te - nu u - vo - 'e - nu le - ha - yim u - le - sha - lo - o - om

Figure 2

Evening Service - Sabbath and Festival	ערבית לשבת ולרגלים
Cause us, O Lord our God, to lie down in peace, and raise us up again, O our King, unto life.	השכיבנו ה' אלהינו לשלום והעמידנו מלכנו לחיים.
Spread over us Thy tabernacle of peace Direct us aright through Thine own good counsel Save us for Thy name's sake.	ופרוש עלינו סכת שלומך ותקננו בעצה טובה מלפניך והושיענו למען שמך.
Be Thou a shield about us. Remove from us every enemy, pestilence, sword, famine and sorrow. Help us, O Lord, to resist temptation.	והגן בעדנו והסר מעלינו אויב דבר וחרב ורעב ויגון והסר שטן מלפנינו ומאחרינו.
Shelter us with Thy protecting love for Thou art our guardian and deliverer. Yea, Thou God and King art gracious and compassionate.	ובצל כנפיד תסתירנו כי אל שומרנו ומצילנו אתה כי אל מלך חנון ורחום אתה.
Guard our going out and our coming in unto life and peace, henceforth and forever more. Yea, do Thou spread over us the tabernacle of Thy peace.	ושמור צאתנו ובואנו לחיים ולשלום מעתה ועד עולם. ופרוש עלינו סכת שלומך.
Blessed be Thou, O Lord, who spreadest the tabernacle of peace over us, over Israel and over Jerusalem.	ברוך אתה ה' הפורש סכת שלום עלינו ועל כל עמו ישראל ועל ירושלים.