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## A Gift Ignored

By [William Goldstein](#)

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*William Goldstein*

The Master of the Universe has given us a gift that can connect us to the spiritual world, the one that exists beyond our physical reality. That gift is music, yet, sadly, most synagogues ignore the spiritual power of highly organized art music, the form many refer to as "classical music."

For a people who have had no problem remembering an oral law handed down thousands of years ago, how is it possible that there is no knowledge of the music of the Temple period? Music is far easier for the mind to retain than text, so this is a great mystery. Text was remembered and music forgotten?

Notwithstanding the mystical kabbalistic tradition or the more recent (relatively speaking) Chasidic tradition, it seems traditional Judaism's turning away from music as an active part of prayer is also a stepping away from the mystical and spiritual. Without the mystical and spiritual, there is no balance to the intellectual and analytical that have become the primary component of many peoples' Judaism.

It is my belief that one evolves and gets closer to God when one has brought these polarities into balance. Mainstream Judaism talks about finding God but doesn't try to get us there by balancing the spiritual with the intellectual.

We are told that in the days of the Temple, music was recognized as a powerful spiritual tool. The Temple services were punctuated by great orchestras and choruses that fulfilled the commandment to "make a joyful noise unto the Master of the Universe."

Not only were there musical offerings unto Hashem, but new musical offerings. It wasn't just Temple sacrifices that were called for on a regular basis, new musical compositions were also commanded in praise of Hashem and to elevate the souls of the Children of Israel.

The tradition has survived in Christianity, where great works by masters such as Bach, Handel, Mozart and Beethoven still inspire and uplift all of us who come in contact with these great works. Bach was quite aware of his spiritual gift and signed and dedicated all of his compositions to the greater glory of God. Even Mozart, who wallowed when he could in the temporal pleasures of the physical life, was well aware of the source of his genius and believed he had a responsibility to the Supreme Master to create works of astounding spiritual power.

In today's traditional Jewish service, the congregation is the choir. Everyone sings, creating moments that are spiritually connective. But another level of spiritual connectivity can happen through refined, complex musical work. Such music is thought to have existed in Temple days, was experimented with again in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries and has been ignored for the most part in contemporary Jewish religious services.

Yes, there are those congregations that focus on music, usually in a highly accessible or folk form. There are also a handful of congregations that commission new works of a more complex nature. And even in the Orthodox world, there is one synagogue that maintains music as a spiritual tool: If you are in Jerusalem on the High Holy Days, visit Hechal Shlomo, where a large professional men's choir sings real music that has the power to elevate and transform.

This is all very positive, but does it go far enough? Orthodoxy, which is generally acknowledged to be the keeper of the flame, acknowledges the power of music as a spiritual tool on the one hand but often minimizes its use on the other hand. Psalms 92 and 33 could not be more clear.

Psalm 92: It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord / and to sing praises unto Thy name, O Most High / With an instrument of ten strings, and with the psaltery; with a solemn sound upon the harp.

Psalm 33: Give thanks unto the Lord with harp, sing praises unto Him with the psaltery of ten strings. / Sing unto Him a new song; play skillfully amid shouts of joy.

These psalms are indicative of how even those Jews who observe the letter of the law most often pay no heed to the spirit of the Tehillim (Psalms), which make quite clear how we are expected to praise the Master of the Universe. As Jews disproportionately have excelled in so many fields, so it is true in music. Here is a partial honor roll: Felix Mendelsohn; Johann Strauss, who was a Jew from Hungary; Jacques Offenbach, a Jew from Germany. Camielle Saint-Saens, Gustav Mahler and Ernst Bloch.

Ravel's mother was of Jewish origin, and he wrote a Kaddish. Arnold Schoenberg revolutionized 20th century music, as have Phillip Glas and Steven Reich.

Where would American music be without Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein? And where would Broadway be without Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe and Kurt Weil?

We are blessed with many gifted composers who have created works to honor and glorify the name of Hashem and to uplift the soul of our people. Yet how often are the works of the great 17th century Italian Jewish composer Solomone Rossi (1570-1628) performed? What about the works of Bloch, or Ravel's Kaddish; or Leonard Bernstein's Kaddish or his Jeremiah Symphony or Chichester Psalms, all works of great spiritual vitality.

No major Jewish organization today commissions and performs art music created to glorify and elevate God. There are no synagogues that include such works of awe in their daily or weekly services, and while some attempt to elevate their High Holy Days services, this is not the norm.

We need to take the psalms literally. Their message could not be more clear: We should be utilizing the immense musical talent that the Master of the Universe has bestowed upon the Jewish people and commission composers to create music, utilizing real choirs and/or orchestras to create the kind of spiritual experience that today can be found in the secular world of the concert hall. If these works are performed on a regular basis, it will greatly increase our spiritual connectivity.

We live in a very complex world. The Master of the Universe constantly challenges us but also gives us the tools to deal with the seemingly impossible conflicts that make up the world we live in. We were given Torah. We were given music. We were given free will. We need to bring these gifts into balance and make a "Joyful noise unto the Lord." Who knows, it may make for a better world or, at the very least, a more meaningful, inspiring existence for each of us.

*William Goldstein has composed for film, television, concert halls and is nearing production of a Broadway musical. He was commissioned by The U.S. Army Chorus to compose "Zoch Rainu L'Chaim," published but rarely performed. He has written some nigunim that are occasionally sung at Beth Jacob. Thirty years ago he was commissioned by the Christian Science Church to compose several pieces, which are performed on a regular basis.*

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