

# The Synagogue and Canadian music

Srul Irving Glick

The history of liturgical music in Canada begins with music traditions from Europe and Russia in cantorial chant and choral music. That tradition served as a catalyst in the birth of Canadian inspired liturgical music since 3 of the most active Jewish Canadian composers are sons of cantors – Gordon Kushner, Ben Steinberg, and Srul Irving Glick. Gordon Kushner is music director and conductor at Beth Tzedec Synagogue in Toronto. Ben Steinberg is music director, choral conductor, and organist at the Temple Sinai in Toronto, and S.I. Glick is composer-in-residence and choir director at Beth Tikvah Synagogue in Toronto. Unfortunately, in Canada, however, most of the creative development in liturgical music is confined to the Toronto area.

Music has, since the inception of Judaic prayer, been a part of a formal structure. In the ancient Temple in Jerusalem in 1000 B.C.E., there were both large choral and orchestral ensembles of Levites. When the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 C.E., Jews were dispersed throughout the western world where numerous independent traditions grew. Nevertheless, because of the longing for Zion, much of Jewish musical tradition was rooted in the ancient tradition of chanting the Torah (Bible) and the chanting of Psalms and prayers, particularly by the cantor. This tradition has never stopped but the choral music tradition, through expression of grief at the loss of the Temple was not renewed until the 1800 – which makes this aspect of Jewish music quite young in comparison with other religious traditions.

In Toronto, cantors such as David Bagley, Paul Kowarsky, and Benjamin Maissner continue the tradition of creating cantorial chant. Charles Heller of Beth Emeth and Bais Yehuda Synagogue in Toronto makes numerous choral arrangements for cantor Louis Danto and other cantors. Young Canadian composer Sid Robinovitch is also beginning to arrange and compose liturgical music for cantor and choir. Last year his *Shir Hanagid*, a lengthy cantata based on Sephardic melodies was performed at Beth Tzedec Synagogue. Also, Amy Gilbert, choir director of Temple Emmanuel in Toronto commissioned Sid Robinovitch to write *Rodas Recordada* (Rhodes remembered) for a Friday evening service.

In the Orthodox tradition, there is a strong leaning towards cantorial music with little or no creative attempts by Canadian composers to write for this denomination. The Conservative and Reform traditions seem to have the bulk of creative activities. The Reform movement's basic service occurs on Friday evening and has a place for new music to be presented as either part of the main service or a musical interlude within the service. For example, Milton Barnes was commissioned to write his *Shma* for tenor, choir and piano for Temple Emmanuel as part of the service. Milton Barnes was also commissioned to write his *Shir Hashirim* for tenor, mezzo-soprano, 7 solo instruments and mixed choir for Holy Blossom Temple as a special interlude for Friday night services. Also in the Reform tradition another emerging young composer, Edward Labow, has been encouraged to write for Synagogue choir by Cantor Maissner and has been performed by the choir at Holy Blossom Temple.

But by far the most important and prolific composer in the reform Tradition in Canada has been Ben Steinberg, whose music continues to be performed in services across Canada and the United States. For example his *Crown of Torah* for children's

choir and ensemble has been recently performed at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto and will be performed at Temple Emmanuel in Toronto. Steinberg's music is heard regularly at his own Temple Sinai in both services and in concert. He has received commissions for the honouring of special occasions, such as the 25th Anniversary of Temple Sinai. His music is also performed in other synagogues and temples in Toronto, particularly at Holy Blossom where Steinberg had earlier been music director for many years. For the past 17 years Steinberg has been active in the presentation of Jewish music programs at Temple Sinai, presenting both liturgical and concert music. Composers represented in his series includes works by Barnes, Glick, Kushner, Steinberg, Robinovitch, Charles Heller and Alexander Brott.

In the Conservative movement, several works have been written by Gordon Kushner for the Beth Tzedec cantor and choir. It is Srul Irving Glick, however, who has been responsible for the largest body of liturgical music in the Conservative movement, which he has composed for Beth Tikvah Synagogue in Toronto. Glick has been choir director at Beth Tikvah, for 17 years, as well as composer-in-residence for the past several years. This is, perhaps, a unique position in the world of Jewish liturgical music. Besides arranging, composing and conducting on a regular basis, Glick has received special commissions from lay people of Beth Tikvah synagogue. Not only has the Beth Tikvah choir sung Glick's music at their home synagogue, but also at many other synagogues in Toronto, Hamilton, London, Kingston, Ottawa, Montreal, and Washington D.C. as well as in Israel.

Both Steinberg and Glick have received the coveted Kavod Award (award of Honour) for their "dedication to the music of the Synagogue", presented to them by the Cantors' Assembly of America. In November/85 Beth Tikvah Synagogue received the Solomon Schechter Award presented by the United Synagogue of America for their "pursuit of excellence" in their music program.

Worth mentioning at this time has been the work of the Toronto Jewish Congress Music committee who have, over the years, commissioned Jewish liturgical, secular and concert music from such composers as Weinzweig, Brott, Surdin, Morawetz, Applebaum, Chapman, Freedman, Gellman, Levitan, Glick, Steinberg and Robinovitch.

Though not all Canadian Jewish composers write liturgical music, a great many of them have written works on Jewish subjects, on Hebrew, Yiddish or Biblical texts: Alfred Fisher, Lothar Klein, Murray Adaskin, Marvin Duchow, Alexander Brott, Leon Zuckert, and almost all the previously mentioned composers. Among these works it is worth mentioning two compositions by Saul Chapman: *Yad Vashem*, a work to commemorate the Holocaust on poems by Primo Levy, for soprano vocalise, instrumental ensemble and prepared electronic tape, and the story of Ruth based on a libretto by Donia Glenman for soloists and chamber orchestra. This latter work was jointly commissioned by Holy Blossom Temple and the C.B.C. Another work worth mentioning is the "Echoes of Children", a large cantata for tenor, narrator, children's chorus, mixed choir and orchestra by Ben Steinberg. This work won a coveted Gabriel Broadcast award for its first performance several years ago.