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# CHORAL JOURNAL

Official Publication of the American Choral Directors Association

Dennis Shrock, Editor    Melanie Childers, Managing Editor

SEPTEMBER 1990

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# Choral Music for Chanukah

by Joshua R. Jacobson

An article on Chanukah music appears in this issue so that conductors who are interested in performing the music described herein may have time to purchase and rehearse it.

Chanukah is *not* the Jewish Christmas. True, the two holidays often occur at the same time (Chanukah is an eight-day holiday which begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew lunar month of Kislev). True, in our multi-cultural society, community leaders and educators make an effort to acknowledge the celebrations of many different traditions. True, retailers have extended the market for Christmas sales by inventing the concept of "Chanukah shopping." But fundamentally the two holidays are quite different.

While Christmas is one of the most important holidays on the Christian liturgical calendar, Chanukah is a minor holiday and a relative latecomer. The first Chanukah was celebrated in the year 164 b.c.e. when the holy Temple in Jerusalem was reconsecrated after a bitter four-year struggle against the Syrian-Hellenistic invaders. The major Jewish festivals such as Passover and Yom Kippur were instituted some 3000 years ago, and their observance is detailed in the Old Testament; Chanukah, on the other hand, is mentioned nowhere in the scriptural canon.

Furthermore, while the celebration of the major Jewish holy days entails cessation from work and a lengthened, more ornate synagogue service, the



eight days of Chanukah are regarded as normal workdays, and there is little time in the worship service for musical elaboration.

The liturgy for Chanukah consists of one prayer, *Al HaNissim* ("For the Miracles"), which is inserted into the daily prayers of supplication, the cantillation of a special lesson from the Pentateuch, and the chanting of the Festival Psalms (113-118). Apart from the liturgy, though, there are festive rituals associated with the celebration of Chanukah in the home. On the eight nights of Chanukah candles are lit in the home by each member of the family, accompanied by the singing of hymns and blessings. Festive meals are prepared, at which special holiday foods are served. It is not surprising then that the richest vein of Chanukah music centers around the home: hymns for the lighting of the candles and folksongs for children.

The best known hymn for Chanukah is *Maoz Tsur*, generally rendered in English as "Rock of Ages."

The Hebrew text of this hymn was written in the thirteenth century by the Italian Rabbi, Mordecai Ben Isaac HaLevy, whose name can be found in the initial letters of the five stanzas of the poem.<sup>1</sup>

In America today, the best known melody for this hymn is one which has been sung by European Jewry for over 500 years. Interestingly, it closely resembles three German folksongs, one of which also served as the inspiration for a Lutheran chorale.<sup>2</sup> Example 1 shows the *Maoz Tsur* tune as notated by Cantor Abraham Beer in 1791;<sup>3</sup> Examples 2, 3, and 4 are excerpts from three sixteenth-century German folksongs: "Ich weiss mir ein Meidlein hübsch und fein,"<sup>4</sup> "Van Coninck Maximilian,"<sup>5</sup> and "So weiss ich eins was mich erfreut."<sup>6</sup> Example 5 is the first phrase of the Lutheran Chorale, "Nun freut euch lieben Christen g'mein."<sup>7</sup>

There are several choral arrangements of this popular Chanukah hymn. My favorite is the setting by Abraham Binder, with its lush "purple" chromatic harmonies (Example 6).

For centuries, music in the Jewish traditions was transmitted orally; it is rare to find transcriptions into Western notation before the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The oldest printed source of Chanukah music is another melody for the *Maoz Tsur* hymn, notated by the Italian composer Benedetto Marcello. The story of how an Italian church musician came to publish a synagogue melody is of some interest. On a Chanukah night about 270 years ago, Marcello crossed over from Christian Venice into the Jewish ghetto. He was heading for the great Ashkenazic synagogue, famed for the beautiful music used in its services. Marcello, a

Jacobson is Chairman of the Department of Music at Northeastern University and Director of the University's choral program. He is also founder and director of the Zamir Chorale of Boston.

successful lawyer and politician, was also a composer of church music and about to begin work on his greatest project, *Estro poetico-armonico*, a musical setting of the first fifty Psalms from the Bible. Like other great artists of his time, he felt the need to base his creative work on that of the ancients. But while his contemporaries based their church music on Gregorian chant, Marcello decided to go further back, to the roots of Psalm singing in ancient Jerusalem. And so Marcello entered the synagogue to hear how the Jews were perpetuating their ancient musical traditions.

When he published his Psalm settings in 1724, Marcello prefaced some of his compositions with the

*The best known hymn for Chanukah is Maoz Tsur, generally rendered in English as "Rock of Ages."*

Jewish melodies which he had transcribed, the Hebrew text and music reading from right to left. Marcello used the *Maoz Tsur* melody as the basis for his setting of Psalm 15 (in Italian). Example 7 reproduces Marcello's rendition of the Venetian *Maoz Tsur* melody and a modern transcription of the tune.

Several twentieth-century composers have arranged the Venetian *Maoz Tsur* for chorus. Hugo Chaim Adler, a cantor from Worcester, Massachusetts, and the father of composer Samuel Adler, made a lovely arrangement in a straight-forward homophonic setting, substituting for the original text a paraphrase of Psalm 137, *By*

Example 1

Mo-os Zur

Abraham Beer, Baal Tefillah, 1791

Andantino moderato

Mo - os zur j' - schu - o - si l'cho no eh l' - schab -  
Tik - kon bes l' - fil - lo - si w'schom to - doh n' - sab -

be - ach. L'es to - chin mat - be - ach miz - zor hamm' - nab -  
be - ach.

be - ach os eg - mor b'schir mis - mor cha - nuk - kas ham - mis -

be - ach.

Example 2

Ich Weiss ein Meidlein hübsch und fein

Reutherriche Liedlein, 1544

Huet du dich, huet du dich, sie nar - ret dich, sie nar - ret dich.

Example 3

Van Coninck Maximilian

Sonterliedkens ad Ps. 41, 1540

Van co - ninck Ma - xi - mi - lien ghe - bo - ren ut Öst'r - reich

Example 4

So weiss ich eins

Franz Böhme, Altdeutsches Liederbuch, 1877

So weiss ich eins, das mich er - freut, das

plüm - lein prey - ter Hey - den.

Example 5

Nun freut euch lieben Christen gmein

M. Luther, Wittenberg, 1520

Nun freut euch lie - ben Chri - sten gmein, und

lasst uns frö - lich sprin - gen.

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Example 6

**Maoz Tsur**

arranged by Abraham Binder

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*the Waters of Babylon* (Example 8). A setting by the prominent New York composer Hugo Weisgall is quite different. He uses the original text (with an alternate singable English translation), and his tasteful, dry, lean style is reminiscent of the neo-classicism of fifty years ago (Example 9).

Perhaps the best known musical setting of the story of Chanukah is George Frideric Handel's oratorio, *Judas Maccabaeus*. While the libretto of *Judas* is based on the exploits of the ancient Jewish freedom fighter as recorded in the Apocrypha, to the 18th century British public, the work also stood as a metaphor for its own national aspirations. In April of 1746, just months before the work was composed, the British army had finally succeeded in ridding the country of a foreign invasion by the Stuarts. *Judas* was also very popular among the Jews of London; this was

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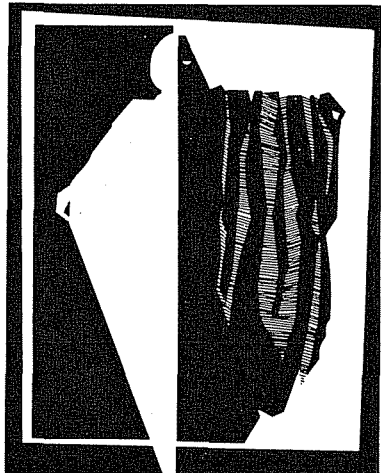
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*Perhaps the best known musical setting of the story of Chanukah is George Frideric Handel's oratorio, Judas Maccabaeus.*

might want to consider a performance of the complete oratorio. Others may wish to program several excerpts. Among the most popular choruses are "See the Conquering Hero Comes" and "Hallelujah, Amen," either of which can be performed by the average high school chorus. There are a number of editions of the oratorio available. Conductors should be wary,



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### Example 7

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Example 8

By The Waters of Babylon

Hugo Ch. Adler

Andante molto

SOPRANO

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

ORGAN or PIANO (ad lib.)

By the waters, the wa-ters of Ba-by-lon -

By the wa - ters of Ba-by-lon -

By the waters of Ba-by-lon

By the waters of Ba-by-lon

Andante molto

mp

there we sat down, - we sat down and wept. There our harps we

there we sat down, - we sat down and wept. There our harps we

there we sat down, - we sat down and wept. There our harps we

there we sat down, - we sat down and wept. There our harps we

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however; some of the editions contain numerous undocumented cuts and changes.

The first choral settings of the traditional melodies for Chanukah were composed by Salomon Sulzer (1804-1890), the famed cantor of the Seitenstettengasse Temple in Vienna.<sup>9</sup> Sulzer's monumental opus, *Schir Zion*, the first volume of which was published in 1840, comprised the first setting for cantor, choir, and organ of the entire synagogue liturgy.<sup>10</sup> While many of these compositions are quite ornate, Sulzer's contribution for Chanukah is quite modest, consisting merely of a simple arrangement for cantor and choir of the blessings for the lighting of the candles (Example 10).

Sulzer's innovations, however, ushered in a new era of synagogue music. In Paris, the chief cantor, Samuel Naumbourg (1815-1880), composed a complete liturgical cycle, *Zemirot Yisrael*, which was published in 1847.<sup>11</sup> Naumbourg's collection includes a setting for cantor, choir, and organ of the traditional German melody for *Maoz Tsur*. In Russia, Cantors Hirsch Weintraub<sup>12</sup> (1817-1881) and Elieser Gerovitch<sup>13</sup> (1844-1914) both composed settings of Chanukah hymns for choir and cantor. Sulzer's most illustrious pupil, Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894), choir director for the Oranienburgerstrasse Temple in Berlin, also composed a setting of the entire liturgical cycle for four-part

choir, cantor, and organ.<sup>14</sup> One of Lewandowski's loveliest compositions for Chanukah is *HaNeiros Halawlu*, a hymn traditionally sung just after the kindling of the Chanukah lights. Lewandowski's setting reflects his desire to introduce a spirit of dignity, splendour, and majesty into the Jewish service (Example 11).

In 1888 the German composer Max Bruch composed a work for chorus and orchestra entitled, *Hebräische Gesänge*, the third movement of which uses the German *Maoz Tsur* melody mentioned above. Although Bruch was not Jewish, he was attracted more than once to Hebrew themes, as is evidenced by his popular *Kol Nidre* for cello and orchestra, based on the well-known melody for the Yom Kippur service.

The genesis of *Hebräische Gesänge* goes back to 1815 when Lord Byron had written a cycle of poems on Old Testament themes. Byron presented his poems to Isaac Nathan, a young composer of "musical farces and operatic works" and invited him to set them to music. Nathan, who had some background in the Jewish liturgy, chose to set the poems to

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existing Jewish melodies. It is curious that Nathan chose the festive *Maoz Tsur* hymn as his melody for the somber poem, *On Jordan's Banks*, a lament for the Jewish exile. At any rate, Bruch's arrangement of Nathan's setting is a dramatic composition, calling for mixed chorus (divisi), large orchestra, and organ.

In the twentieth century a number of choral composers began to create a more sizeable repertoire of music for Chanukah. There are several reasons for this surge of inspiration. One is the growth of Jewish choral societies,

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which first appeared at the turn of the century in Eastern Europe and soon spread to the United States and Israel. Another is the recent interest among community and public school groups in representing a diversity of holiday traditions. Unfortunately, much of the repertoire of recent vintage has been hastily crafted to meet the needs of the moment. Nonetheless, one can find a number of works that are of more than passing interest.

*Arise and Be Free* is a suite of four a cappella choral songs for Chanukah

Example 9

Fortress, Rock of our Salvation

Arranged by Hugo Weisgall

Allegretto, con spirito

Mo - os tzur ye - shu o - si, l'  
For - tress, Rock of our sal - va - - tion,

Mo - os tzur ye - shu o - si, l'  
For - tress, Rock of our sal - va - - tion,

Mo - os tzur ye - shu o - si, l'  
For - tress, Rock of our sal - va - - tion,

Mo - os tzur ye - shu o - si, l'  
For - tress, Rock of our sal - va - - tion,

Allegretto, con spirito

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S  
A  
T  
B

cho no - e le - sha - be - ach, Ti - kon bes te -  
us sing to you in hymns of praise; Build a - new the

cho no - e le - sha - be - ach, Ti - kon bes te -  
we sing to you in hymns of praise; Build a - new the

cho no - e le - sha - be - ach, Ti - kon bes te -  
we sing to you in hymns of praise; Build a - new the

cho no - e le - sha - be - ach, Ti - kon bes te -  
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Example 10

Chanukah Candle Lighting Blessings

Salomon Sulzer

Edited by Joshua R. Jacobson

style of polyphony and the addition of tambourine and clay drum. To be released later this year is *Al HaNissim/Sing to God*, an arrangement for chorus and piano (with optional band) of a Klezmer-style tune by Dov Frimer.

From the same publisher are Herbert Fromm's *Hanukah Madrigal*, a beautifully crafted contrapuntal setting of a traditional Ashkenazic folksong, and *Light the Legend*, an original composition by Michael Isaacson, employing some of the rhythms and modes characteristic of modern Israeli folk song. Both works can be sung in either Hebrew or English.

Conductors who are looking for more light-hearted repertoire might consider two works from HaZamir Publications. *I Have a Little Dreydel* is a rock'n'roll version of a popular

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by Steven Barnett of Minnesota. Each of the four is based on a well-known Ashkenazic<sup>15</sup> Chanukah children's song. The settings are challenging, but fun to sing and fun to listen to, making frequent use of jazz rhythms and chords.

Transcontinental Publications has just initiated a new series entitled, "Chanukah Around the World." So far, two octavos have been released in this series; each can be sung in either Hebrew or English. *Aleih Neiri/Rise Up My Light* is by the Israeli-American composer, Chaim Parchi. In it a beautifully lyrical melody is set in a jewel-like background in which the chorus imitates the sound of bells. *Mi Zeh Yemaleil/I Sing of the Wonders* is a setting by the present author of a Moroccan folksong. The exotic modality of the original melody is complemented with a non-Western

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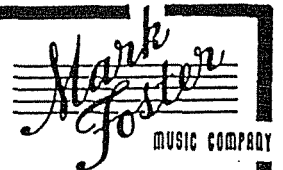
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**Example 11**

**Ha Neiros Halawlu**

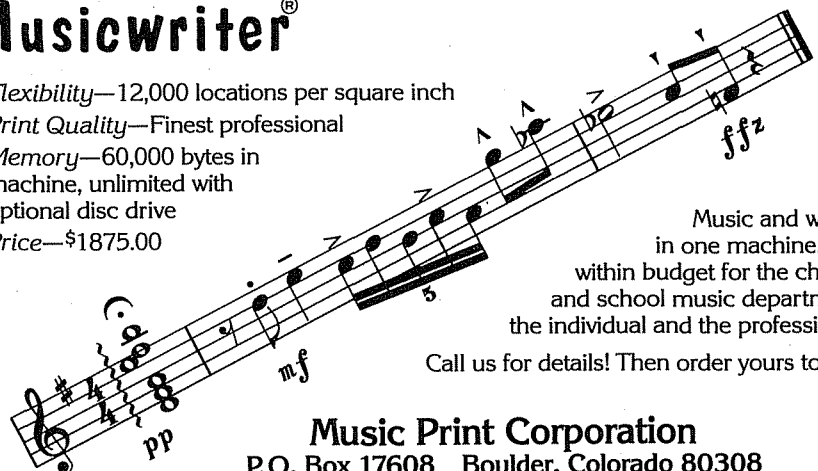
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children's song for Chanukah, arranged by Matthew Lazar. The present author's *Chanukah Variations* is a humorous composition based on an old Ashkenazic children's song. Each variation has a unique character, ranging in style from the traditional hymn to nineteenth-century bombast to contemporary jazz and aleatoric techniques.

Many conductors annually undertake a search for repertoire suitable for Chanukah that can be introduced into a December concert. This article is not a comprehensive list of choral music for Chanukah; rather, it is an attempt to present a broad selection of repertoire for mixed chorus based on the experience of numerous concerts and the reactions of singers and audiences. CJ

### Compositions mentioned in the article

Title	Composer	Publisher	Forces
Al HaNissim	Dov Frimer	Transcontinental	satb, piano
Aley Neyri	Chaim Parchi	Transcontinental	satb, barit. solo
Arise and Be Free	Steve Barnett	Transcontinental	
1. Sevivon			satb div
2. Yemey Chanukah			satb div
3. Mi Yemalel			satb div
4. Mi Zeh Hidlik			satb div
Chanukah Variations	Joshua Jacobson	Hazamir Publications	satb, div
Della Vita/Maoz Tsur	Benedetto Marcello	Hazamir Publications	s, continuo
Fortress, Rock	Hugo Weisgall	Merion (T. Presser)	satb
Haneyros Halawlu	Louis Lewandowski	Hazamir Publications	satb, organ
Hanukah Madrigal	Herbert Fromm	Transcontinental	satb, sop solo
Hebrew Songs	Max Bruch	Kalmus	satb, orchestra
I Have a Little Dreydel	Michael Gelbart	Hazamir Publications	satb, piano, tenor solo
from Judas Maccabaeus: See the Conquering Hero Hallelujah, Amen	Handel	Kalmus	satb, sa soli, piano satb, piano
Light the Legend	Michael Isaacson	Transcontinental	satb, piano
Maoz Tsur	Italian chant	HaZamir	unison
Maoz Tsur	traditional/Binder	Transcontinental	satb
Mi Zeh Yemalel	Joshua Jacobson	Transcontinental	satb div, barit. solo, tambourine and clay drum

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Macy Nulman, *Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), pp. 90-92.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham Beer, *Baal Tefillah* (MS, 1791; reprint ed., New York: Sacred Music Press, 1954). This is the first known appearance of this melody in Western notation.

<sup>4</sup> K. Othmayr, *Reutherriche Liedlein* (1544), quoted in Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard*, p. 90 and p. 262.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard*, p. 90 and p. 262.

<sup>6</sup> Idelsohn, *Jewish Music* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1929; reprint edition, New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard*, p. 90 and p. 262.

<sup>8</sup> Polyphony is not found in Jewish music (with rare exceptions) until the nineteenth century. The Rabbis zealously (but not always successfully) guarded lest the chants from the ancient Middle Eastern homeland become diluted through contact with Western music. And so, synagogue music retained many of its Mediterranean characteristics: it was, by and large, modal, melismatic, monophonic, and male dominated.

<sup>9</sup> Sulzer's legendary singing attracted the notice of music lovers from a variety of backgrounds, including Franz Liszt, who wrote in 1859, "We went to the synagogue to hear (Sulzer). 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 participation in the service." (quoted in A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music*, p. 253.)

<sup>10</sup> Salomon Sulzer, *Schir Zion* (Vienna: n.p., 1840; reprint ed., New York: Sacred Music Press, 1954).

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Naumbourg, *Zemirot Yisrael* (Paris: n.p., 1847; reprint ed., New York: Sacred Music Press, 1954).

<sup>12</sup> Hirsch Weintraub, *Schire Beth Adonai* (Königsberg: n.p. 1959; reprint ed., New York: Sacred Music Press, 1954).

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Merion Music, Theodore Presser, Presser Place, Bryn Mawr, PA  
Transcontinental Music Publications, 838 Fifth Avenue, NYC, NY 10021

<sup>13</sup> Elieser Gerovitsch, *Schirej Simroh* (Rostov: n.p., 1904; reprint ed., New York: Sacred Music Press, 1954).

<sup>14</sup> Louis Lewandowski, *Todah W'Simrah* (Berlin: n.p., 1876-1882; reprint ed., New York: Sacred Music Press, 1954).

<sup>15</sup> "Ashkenazic" refers to the Jewish traditions which originated in Northern Europe. The other two main divisions are "Sephardic," referring to the Jews of Spanish origin, and "Oriental," referring to the Jews who lived in the Arab lands of the Middle East.

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