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## Experiencing Beauty in the Music of the Holocaust

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FEW EVENTS IN WESTERN HISTORY have had the kind of impact—historically, ideologically, culturally, and psychologically—as the Holocaust. A series of incidents of almost incomprehensible horror, the Holocaust is not only a diabolical chapter in the history of the twentieth century but a powerful cultural symbol of humanity’s evil on the one hand and humanity’s suffering on the other. Even seventy years later, the events of the Holocaust continue to influence our thinking on issues such as racism, nationalism, and fascism, and we remain fascinated with and moved by stories and art related to the holocaust in a variety of genres.

I too am drawn to the history and art of the Holocaust, both as a Christian and as a musicologist. As a young girl I heard stories of how my grandparents on both sides of the family lived in Nazi-occupied Netherlands during the war and helped Jews hide from the Nazis. My paternal grandparents (Syrt and Luciena Wolters) hid a family of four in their attic in Enschede for two and half years, beginning in 1942 (Wolters, 1995), and my maternal grandparents (Hendrikus and Wilhelmina Van Anandel), along with another Dutch family, took a young Jewish woman and a small Jewish boy into their home in Arnhem in 1944. For my grandparents, this was an act of faith. They believed that there was no other option for Christians but to help their victimized neighbors. I grew up understanding Holocaust stories from the lens of Christian ethics and was terribly disillusioned to realize, as a young teenager, that far more Christians persecuted or ignored Jews than helped them during the war, and furthermore that there was in the history of the church a long tradition of anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, I am still drawn to Holocaust topics in part because they invite discussions about good and evil doing battle in history. Even when these discussions are difficult, such as when we ask how God could have allowed the Holocaust to take place at all, they are rooted in a clear sense of right and wrong.

As a Christian musicologist, I am drawn to studying music of the Holocaust for some of the same reasons. This study allows me to talk about good and evil in the realm of musical activity in a way that would be more difficult in relation to other, more ubiquitous, settings. Although issues of music and morality are notoriously difficult, few will disagree that when SS officers forced prisoners to play joyful tunes as other inmates walked to their deaths, evil was taking place, whether they understand the concept of “evil” in secular or religious terms. This acknowledgement can lead to further insights about social and moral issues in music making

generally. But more broadly speaking, the music of the Holocaust allows me to argue for the all-important role of context in understanding musical meaning, musical identity, and the experience of beauty in music. The use of music in the original historical context of the Holocaust and our continued fascination with music related to that context invites fundamental questions about the very nature of music, musical hermeneutics, and musical aesthetics. These are questions that I invite you to ponder with me.

### **Music: Object or Action?**

Before examining specific instances of Holocaust music, allow me briefly to address some larger philosophical questions in musicology that have bearing on this discussion. Of the many changes that postmodernism has brought to the discipline of musicology in the last twenty-five years, one of the most profound has been a shift in our understanding of the very ontology of music. Rather than seeing music as work-based phenomenon, a “thing,” a new breed of music scholars, who sometimes call themselves cultural musicologists, argue that music is an experience-based phenomenon, or “action.” This point was famously argued by Christopher Small in his book *Musicking*, in which he writes,

[T]he fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do. It is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfills in human life. (Small 1998, 8)

I will argue that this categorical or philosophical shift—seeing music as an action rather than an object—is enormously helpful in understanding how music works in a particular historical and social context, especially a context of crisis such as the Holocaust. While I believe there is still some place for thinking of music in terms of works, thinking of it *only* in these terms is limiting. Small and others have helped clarify that if one is attempting to make sense of the beauty, ethics, and meaning of a musical practice, such as listening to Holocaust music, it makes quite a difference whether you think the heart of that practice is a thing, i.e. a musical *work*, or an action, i.e. a musical *experience*. If you believe that the heart of musical practice lies in a musical *work*, you will concern yourself primarily with structural aspects such as melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, form, and other patterns of sound in determining its beauty, ethics, and meaning. If you believe that the heart of the musical practice lies in a musical *experience*, you have a much broader discussion that can include the structural aspects I’ve just noted, as well as a wide variety of social, historical, and cultural realities as interpreted by those participating in the music making. Using this methodology, the central question of musical beauty changes from “Is the musical work beautifully constructed?” to “How is the musical experience constructed as beautiful by those engaged in it?”

In the following examples, I hope to show that the experience of music as beautiful or meaningful is dependent to a significant degree on the context in which that music is experienced. This is especially obvious when the context for music is an extraordinary one, whether positive (such as falling in love) or negative (such as war or oppression). If this is true,

the experience of music which is related in some way to the Holocaust—whether composed and experienced during the war or in later years—cannot help but be shaped to a significant degree by our knowledge of this cataclysmic event in world history. While much Holocaust music has structural aspects that can be understood as beautiful—tuneful melodies, rich harmonies, or poignant settings of texts, for example—these structural aspects alone cannot fully explain why such music has the power to move us so deeply.

### **Music and Context—“Ani Ma’amin”**

To put some of this theorizing into practice, allow me to tell you about “Ani Ma’amin” or “I believe,” a Hebrew song sung by religious Jews who were executed in the concentration camps. The text for this song comes from a creed based on the writings of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, a twelfth-century theologian and philosopher also known as Maimonides. In his commentary on the Messiah, Maimonides compiled thirteen articles of faith which were later written as a creed by an anonymous author. These articles include:

The existence of God  
The absolute unity of God  
The incorporeality of God  
The eternity of God  
That God alone is to be worshipped  
That God communicates to prophets  
That Moses is the greatest prophet  
That the Torah was given by God  
That the Torah is immutable  
That there is divine providence  
That there is divine punishment and reward  
That there will be a Messiah  
That the dead will be resurrected (Seeskin)

It is common among observant Jews to recite this poetic version of the thirteen articles as a daily prayer, beginning each article with the phrase “*Ani ma’amin be-emunah shelemah*” (“I believe with perfect faith”). These powerful statements of belief were in turn used as texts for songs, especially the penultimate article, “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah.”

### ***Ani Ma’amin***

#### **Traditional, arr. Robert Applebaum**

*Ani ma’amin,  
Be’emunah sh’leima  
B’viat hamashiach  
V’af al pi she’yitmamei’ah  
Im kol zeh achakeh lo b’chol yom sheyavo*

*Ani ma'amin*

*I believe,  
With complete belief,  
In the coming of the Messiah.  
And even though he may tarry,  
I will await him each and every day.  
I believe. (Applebaum 2003)*

One version of this faithful text set to music became popular in the Warsaw ghetto, where it was also known as the “*Varshever geto-lid fun frumer yid*” (“song of religious Jews in the Warsaw ghetto”) (Gilbert 2005, 48). It soon spread to other Polish ghettos such as in Lublin, Lodz, and Bialystock, and subsequently to death camps where ghetto inhabitants were sent to be killed (Rubin 2000, 425 and 457). Singing this familiar text about hope in the Messiah in the face of persecution, starvation, and the knowledge of certain death transformed a ubiquitous daily liturgical ritual into a profound statement of faith.

According to the accounts of survivors, believing Jews sometimes sang this song while walking to their deaths in the gas chambers (Gottfarstein 1981, 299). In the Jewish tradition, willingly going to one’s death “for the Holy Name” (*kiddush ha-shem*) rather than forsaking Judaism is considered the highest form of religious devotion (Eisenberg 1981, 280). In addition to other sacrificial humanitarian acts on behalf of others, using one’s death to witness to God’s existence and righteousness was understood as a way to sanctify the Name of God and an important aspect of so-called “spiritual resistance” during the war (Melnick 1995, 396). Thus proudly singing “Ani Ma’amin” on the way to death changed what might have been yet another meaningless death of a faceless Jew into an act of courageous martyrdom. Jewish music scholar Ruth Rubin, commenting about such religious songs sung on the way to death, describes the powerful ability of music to frame an event: “[W]ith a tune, religious Jews martyred themselves” (Rubin, 425). Indeed, in this context music acted as a powerful tool for constructing social meaning in this specific context.

After the war, the song “Ani Ma’amin” came to hold special symbolic meaning in relation to the Holocaust and was used in some of the very first Holocaust memorial ceremonies and programs (Ofer 2000, 36). It continues to be a favorite musical choice for Holocaust commemorations today, often in new arrangements by contemporary composers (Gilbert 2005, 196) such as Robert Applebaum’s arrangement for four-parts. The tune has a folk-like poignancy and the harmonies used in Applebaum’s setting are austere and powerful, but our experience of the beauty and meaning of this piece are inextricably bound to our knowledge of its original context. We respond to the beauty of the melody and harmony, yes, but even more we respond to the poignant act of faith and courage that this song represents. Furthermore, our knowledge about the context of deep suffering and loss of the Holocaust makes this piece far more moving than its structural aspects alone would be, and this experience of being moved is mapped onto our experience of its beauty as well.

**Musical Meaning in Context—Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus***

So far, I have argued that in experiencing music's beauty and meaning, context is key. This is demonstrated in my next example as well, the performance of Handel's oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* by left-wing Jews in North America during the 1940s who interpreted it as a Holocaust piece (Wolters-Fredlund 2005, 197–212). You might think that a work written by Handel in England in 1746 is an unlikely candidate for Holocaust music, and in a way, that is precisely the point I am making. One musical work can be interpreted and experienced in radically different ways in different contexts.

In order to understand the different contexts in which *Judas Maccabaeus* was interpreted, a brief explanation of the work's content and history is warranted. The oratorio outlines the rebellion and eventual victory of the Jewish people, led by the Maccabee family, against their Syrian oppressors in the second century B.C. The text for the oratorio, written for Handel by Rev. Thomas Morell and based on the account of the Maccabean family as found in the Apocrypha, describes the Jewish people mourning the loss of Jerusalem and the temple, the loss of their religious freedom, and the death of the leader of their rebellion, Mattathias. It then outlines a series of military battles led by Mattathias's son, Judas, who, despite having a smaller and less sophisticated army, leads the Jews to a series of victories. The most important of these victories is the recovery of the temple, which subsequent generations have celebrated during Chanukah, the festival of rededication or festival of lights.

As it happens, Handel's musical setting of the story of the Maccabees has a long history of being interpreted in relation to contemporary politics. When Handel wrote the oratorio in 1746, he did so to celebrate the British victory over the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, led by Bonnie Prince Charlie. The principal concerns in the story of the Maccabean revolt—religious identity, freedom of worship, liberty, national unity, and national independence—had strong parallels to British fears of French imperialism generally and the alliance between the Jacobites and the French specifically (Smith 1998, 61). Handel's oratorio, dedicated to the Duke of Cumberland, the leader of the British at the decisive Battle of Culloden, was a huge success.

*Judas Maccabaeus* was quick to become one of Handel's most enduringly popular oratorios. In the decades after it was written, the work was brought over to Germany, where it also became "a treasured national possession" (Dean 1959, 465) and the most popular of all Handel's oratorios except *Messiah* (Levi 1994, 79). In fact, it was used there too in celebration of war victory and national pride. In the late 1920s, the hero in the oratorio was understood as "an exemplar of Teutonic military superiority" (Smith 1995, 212). The association between *Judas Maccabaeus* and German nationalism became a problem for the Nazi party in the 1930s, however, since the work's Jewish hero did not fit with the party's anti-Semitic worldview. As part of the party's initiative to "Aryanize" all music in Germany, *Judas Maccabaeus* was revised and rewritten numerous times in German. One version, which portrayed the main character as a "powerful military dictator—in other words, the Führer himself," was quite popular and received several performances throughout Germany (Levi 1994, 80).

Amazingly, only a few years later, several composers and conductors working in the cultural circles of the Jewish left in North America came up with the idea to sing this same oratorio in Yiddish as an act of solidarity with their brothers and sisters persecuted in Europe. For these Yiddish choruses, the story told in the oratorio had numerous meaningful parallels to modern

circumstances: sorrow and anger at the oppression of Jews, the determination to fight against this oppression, and especially hope in the ability of a small Jewish minority to triumph over a sophisticated and brutal persecutor.

One could argue that the story of the Maccabees is amazingly well-suited to speak to the struggle of the Jews against the Nazis. In fact, the parallel between the Jews oppressed under Syrian rule and the Jews oppressed under Nazi rule is a remarkably straightforward and self-evident one, much more so than Handel and Morell's original parallel of the story to the victory over the Scottish uprising or the manipulation of the story by Nazi Germany to parallel their perceived military and Aryan supremacy.

A few other aspects of the interpretation of this work by left-wing Jews are worth mentioning. One point I have already alluded to, which is that in a somewhat strange and ironic twist, these choirs used this Jewish story to express a Jewish identity, rather than an English or German one, an association made more potent by singing the work in Yiddish translation. In addition, for these choirs, which were associated with the communist-sympathizing arm of the Jewish labor movement, the story of the Maccabees was interpreted as politically progressive. As one long-time member of the Jewish left, Millie Gold, described it: "we could interpret the Maccabees as revolutionaries" (Jacobson 2004, 183). In their socialist reading of the story of the Maccabees, the figure of Judas was seen as a Jewish folk hero, a grass-roots leader who overthrew tyrannical forces to bring equality and justice to the people through revolution.

All this background information about the history of interpretation of *Judas Maccabaeus* makes the point that experiences of the same musical work can vary wildly in different contexts. While the melodies and harmonies and basic plot were similar in each circumstance in which *Judas Maccabaeus* was performed, its meaning and effect changed considerably. It changed from an English story celebrating victory over perceived political and religious persecution, to a German story celebrating military strength and Aryan supremacy, to a Jewish story celebrating socialism and the triumph of a small minority. The character of Judas, meanwhile, was understood to be either the Duke of Cumberland, Adolf Hitler, or a Jewish folk hero. For all groups who sang the work, it held very rich and multi-layered meaning, but their messages were startlingly dissimilar.

Moreover, I assume from the huge popularity of the work in each of these contexts that the work was considered beautiful. The famous post-war Handel scholar Winton Dean pans *Judas Maccabaeus* in his 1959 opus on Handel's oratorios, claiming that the work has been "consistently overvalued," and calling it "not so much a work of art as a victory concert," with a libretto that is "crude" and "blatant" (Dean 1959, 465–6). But for centuries this oratorio has been loved by communities who found it meaningful. Today, one who listens, for example, to the slow and mournful soprano aria "Ah! Wretched Israel" and who considers the rich layers of meaning held in this work by North American Jews who performed it during the war, will find it difficult to describe the music as "crude."

**Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746),  
"Ah! Wretched Israel"  
Text: Rev. Thomas Morell**

*Ah! wretched, wretched Israel! fall 'n how low,  
From joyous transport to desponding woe.  
(Handel 1939)*

**Yiddish Adaptation by Max Helfman  
(music and text, 1942)**

*From the deep, deep valley of lamentation,  
brothers, hear!  
It's the crying of the children of our people,  
Of a people in sorrow, of a people in pain.  
Hear the lamenting cry!  
(Krasny 1942)*

**Yiddish Adaptation by Emil Gartner (music)  
and Vladimir Krasny (text, 1942)**

*You fall, Oh poor Israel, deep down  
From the peak of celebration into the pit of lamenting  
(Helfman 1942).*

**Musical Identity—Helfman's *Di Naye Hagode***

Another Holocaust piece allows us to explore how music can be used to express and construct identity and how beauty plays a role in that dynamic. Composed in 1948, *Di Naye Hagode* (or New Haggadah) is a cantata by Jewish-American composer Max Helfman for narrator, chorus, orchestra, and dancers. It is an adaptation in English and Yiddish of the epic Yiddish poem by Jewish-Soviet poet Itzik Fefer called “Shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto” about the events of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. This work quickly became popular in circles of the Jewish left in post-war years and remains a popular work today (Wolters-Fredlund 2005, 154–161).

Since the reception of this work among North American Jews after the war is tied closely to the iconic status of the story of the uprising itself, a brief summary of these events seems warranted. After the Nazis had deported over 250,000 of the inhabitants of Poland's Warsaw ghetto in 1942, a small army of partisan fighters successfully resisted further deportations in January 1943 with smuggled and hand-made weapons. This small success prompted them to make plans for an uprising, so that when the German troops returned on 19 April, on the eve of Passover, to deport the remaining 50,000 inhabitants of the ghetto, most residents were concealed in hideouts and subterranean bunkers and about 750 were organized in a resistance unit. In the largest single instance of Jewish rebellion during the war, the ghetto fighters defended the ghetto for a month's time before they finally were crushed on 16 May.

Although most involved in the uprising eventually died or were sent to camps, the story of the uprising had, and continues to have, tremendous symbolic importance as a story of human dignity and honor in resistance to oppression. Ghetto fighters were untrained and had few resources against the sophistication of Hitler's army, and yet they refused to be taken away without a fight, insisting, in the rousing words of underground organizers to “die as human

beings” (Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies 2004). Amazingly, they were able to keep back German troops longer than some European countries. As historian Israel Gutman asserts,

No act of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust fired the imagination quite as much as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943. It was an event of epic proportions, pitting a few poorly armed, starving Jews against the might of Nazi power.... The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is a historical event, but it also has become a symbol of Jewish resistance and determination, a moment in history that has transformed the self-perception of the Jewish people from passivity to active armed struggle.... [It] has become a universal symbol for resistance and courage. (Gutman 1994, xi–xii)

As Gutman describes it, the story of the ghetto uprising was and is inexorably tied to constructions of Jewish identity in the post-Holocaust era. For many Jews, the story of the uprising acts as proof that Jews are not a weak, helpless, and defenseless people, but a proud people willing to fight for their freedom or die trying. For left-wing Jews, of course, this story, like Judas Maccabaeus, could also be interpreted as a story of revolution in which the poor starving masses took up arms against their brutal oppressors.

In both Fefer’s original poem about the uprising and in Helfman’s adaptation, the militaristic resistance of the ghetto fighters is emphasized in dramatic fighting scenes which describe the shooting, blood, and flames of the battle in vivid and sometimes graphic language. The attackers are said to have had “venom in their eyes, with satanic faces;” the ghetto martyrs “boldly threw themselves on tanks”; the gunfire is described using the phrase “it rained lead in the Warsaw ghetto”; and the casualties are implied in the phrase “bloody rivers streamed on” (Helfman 2006). In one passage, fierce language is used to express the view that if even one German dies at the hands of the ghetto fighters, the uprising would hold meaning: “If into these Jewish fingernails shall fall even just one butcher to be strangled and choked, one who will not live to see the crack of dawn, I will, from the grave, bless these sons of mine” (Helfman 2006). In the middle of the cantata the battle is evoked using colorful language:

### **Max Helfman’s *Di Naye Hagode* (1948)**

#### **Narrator (English):**

*What three-footed messenger flies through the ghetto?  
The terrible news has routed the Seder like the crack of a shot.  
All eyes are aflame, all hearts filled with courage.  
They’ve come! They’ve come!  
The poison-filled hordes, the slayers have come!  
They were met, met like rare guests, but with lightning and thunder  
by the white-robed fathers,<sup>2</sup> by the queen of each house.  
Each room is a bastion, each cellar a fortress.  
They shoot in the ghetto!*

#### **Di Shlakht (The Battle)—Chorus (Yiddish):**

*There’s shooting in the ghetto, and the ghetto replies,*

*Hate with hate, fire with fire.  
Guns converse here.  
The ghetto seethes with new infernos.*  
(Helfman 1950)

Juxtaposed with this militaristic language and music are passages which describe the everyday lives of ghetto inhabitants and their observance of the Passover ritual in particular. In his poem about the uprising, Itzik Fefer makes frequent reference to the Jewish Haggadah, a word translated generically as “narrative” or “saga,” but conventionally used to refer to the ritual retelling of the Exodus story during the Passover Seder dinner, the account of the ancient Israelites being liberated from slavery in Egypt and their journey to a new homeland. Fefer makes a connection between the Jewish resistance in Warsaw and the Exodus, suggesting that the ghetto uprising is a “new exodus,” and referring in his poem to “*di naye hagode*,” a “new haggadah” that will commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto fighters. Because the uprising began on the eve of the Passover this correlation has a special poignancy.

The cantata opens with one of the four questions traditionally asked by the youngest member at a Seder celebration, “*Ma nishtano halaylo haze mikol haleylays?*” “How is this night different from all other nights?” But in this instance the “night” in question is not the night of the ancient Israelites’ flight from Egypt but the night of the German attack in Warsaw in 1943.

### **Ma Nishtano—Chorus (Yiddish)**

*How is this night different from all other nights?  
Why?  
Why is this night different from all other nights of our lives?  
Why?  
They roam through streets and alleys  
They knock in darkness on wide-open doors,  
They mourn near ruins, they sleep on hard floors,  
They fall upon dark, cold dirt roads.  
They rise once again and wander exhausted  
Through gray abysses, over verdant peaks.  
They have not yet recited their confession;  
They cannot yet find their rest.  
Early in the morning, late at night  
They roam, the shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto.*  
(Helfman, 2006)

This central question is repeated throughout the work and finally answered by the Narrator in English, who says,

Why is this night different from all other nights? Because on this Seder night we remember them all, those nameless shadows who have died so that we may live; who have borne their suffering so that we may live in freedom. In us and in our children, their blessed memories shall live on and on. (Helfman 2006)

This emphasis on religious themes is one of the more interesting aspects of Helfman's cantata and its reception. On the face of it, it would seem quite incongruous that a work with blatant religious themes would become so popular among Yiddish folk choirs in North America, since they had historically been resolutely secular. Before the war, Yiddish choruses of the Jewish left pointedly had avoided sacred music of any kind. It is worth noting, for example, that Helfman was one of the many who wrote adaptations of *Judas Maccabeus* in the early 1940s, and his Yiddish text omits all references to God and all religious language found in Morell's original libretto. For example, one Judas Maccabaeus chorus, which in the original spoke of not bowing down to idols ("We never shall bow down to the rude stock or cultured stone") became a chorus about not bowing to the enemy in Helfman's 1942 Yiddish version: "We will never bow before the rod, The enemy's rod, the barbarian whip smeared with our blood" (Helfman 1942).

But by the time he wrote *Di Naye Hagode* in 1948, Helfman was following in the footsteps of others in the circles of the Jewish Left who began to have a more relaxed attitude to religious themes during and after the war. Even years earlier, during the war, other Yiddish versions of *Judas Maccabaeus*, for example, kept the religious language of Morell's libretto intact, such as the adaptation by Vladimir Krasny. In Krasny's Yiddish adaptation, even such devout texts as "O Father, Whose Almighty Power," "Father of Heav'n, from Thy eternal throne" "Hear us, O Lord, on Thee we call," and (most amazingly!) "We worship God, and God alone" were sung in almost exact translation in Yiddish—a practice that would have been unthinkable before the war.<sup>3</sup>

This relaxed attitude to religious themes can be explained in part by the trend among those in the circles of the Jewish Left to identify themselves with a broad Jewish diaspora during the war rather than primarily the Jewish working classes and communist-sympathizing Jews. During the war, concert program texts of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, for example, speak of "our brothers and sisters in Europe who are standing on the front lines of the struggle against our enemy" (Harris 1943). In the program for this choir's May 1943 concert, which contained several essays about the war, one choir leader asserts that "unity needs to be strengthened among all Jews," and choir director Emil Gartner argues that unity is a vital component to ending the war, and adds, "that unity we owe to the millions of our brothers and sisters chained and murdered by the Nazi beast" (Gartner 1943).

Helfman's cantata *Di Naye Hagode* is certainly not a religious work in the conventional sense. In fact, no mention is made in the cantata of a God who controls the destiny of the Jews. The work is focused entirely on the heroism of the ghetto fighters. But throughout the cantata, images from the Seder ritual permeate the work in such a way as to add poignancy and depth and are always treated respectfully. It affectionately describes households celebrating the Seder in the ghetto who have opened their doors "in expectation of the prophet Elijah," and after the Seder has been interrupted by the German attack, it describes how "the Seder is deserted. The wind now alone chants the prayers." At several points in the cantata, the text is spoken as a prayer, for example, "O Father in Heaven can it really be that in this city of desolation our people once lived and worked and bargained and played with their children?" Moreover, Helfman made use of traditional Judaic chant formulas in several sections of the work, especially in places where the text of the original Haggadah is recalled. By including religious language and allusions to the Passover ritual and at the same time emphasizing the militaristic and revolutionary aspects of the story, Helfman paints a picture of the Jewish people that is united across religious and political

lines. Music is thus used as a tool to shape Jewish identity in quite specific ways in relation to the Holocaust.

For the Jews in North America who sang and continue to sing *Di Naye Hagode*, its connection to a Jewish identity goes beyond a corporate Jewish identity to include a personal Jewish identity as well. Especially when it was sung just after the war, *Di Naye Hagode* had an intense emotional impact on those who sang and heard it because so many had lost friends and family in Poland or in other ghettos and prison camps. One Toronto chorister, named Brenda Fishauf, who had come to Canada from Poland in 1937 and lost most of her extended family in Poland during the war, highlighted *Di Naye Hagode* as one of the most meaningful works she sang in her decades with the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir. She felt as if in singing *Di Naye Hagode* she was telling her own personal story. When I asked her about singing this work after the war, she described her experience by interweaving themes of meaning, identity, suffering, and beauty. In her description, these elements (meaning, identity, suffering, and beauty) seem to be different ways for her to describe the same experience. As she explains,

The music was so beautiful. Not just the music but the contents of it, you know, what it was all about. And of course, having left family in Poland, you know, I mean it was sort of like tied up with my past, my suffering and so on.... It was *so* moving. I mean, I had to fight with myself not to cry while I was singing it, because I felt just because I came from [Poland]... I was telling my story, sort of, you know? That's what it meant to me. (Fishauf, interview by author, 31 October 2003)

Fishauf's words demonstrate how the context of this work and its role in "telling her story" were both inextricably bound to her experience of the work generally and the work's beauty in particular. Her comments indicate that Holocaust music not only shaped and expressed corporate Jewish identities but personal ones as well. Her description also strongly suggests that the experience of beauty is not just heavily shaped by the meaning and context of a work but can often be related to specific personal experiences.

### **Musical Memorialization—A Child's Journey (Horvit/Barzilai)**

The theme of telling a personal story runs through our final example of Holocaust music as well, a piece called *A Child's Journey*. The poems for this work were written many years after the Holocaust by Yaakov Barzilai, a Hungarian-born Jew who survived the Bergen-Belzen concentration camp as a child and immigrated to Israel in 1949. In these poems, Barzilai looks back on his childhood and reflects on the traumatic loss of innocence experienced in his own life and in the lives of other Holocaust children. That Barzilai is an adult looking back and interpreting his experiences is made clear by the reflective opening phrase, "fifty years ago..." but his use of sparse and simple language throughout evoke a child's voice and perspective as well. Throughout the poem these two perspectives—the knowing adult and the innocent child—are understood simultaneously. While the child in the poem is not fully aware of his or her circumstances, the author and audience understand it all too well.

**Michael Horvit's A Child's Journey (1998)**  
Text (Hebrew): Yaakov Barzilai (b. 1933);  
Translation: Shulamit Riedman

### **1. An Accidental Meeting**

Fifty years ago  
when all the trains  
traveled toward one destination  
my mother introduced me  
to God  
He joined us—on our journey.

### **2. I Once Had a Friend**

I once had a friend  
a symbol of cleanliness  
who even defeated the lice.  
One day,  
he was taken to the shower  
and never again  
did I see him  
clean.

### **3. There are No Stars in the Sky**

“Why are there no stars in the sky?”  
The children of God inquired,  
“And why even lamps do not shine there either?”  
The children repeatedly wondered.  
“And if there are no stars  
or lamps  
then, how can God see  
when we wash in the shower?”  
“He does not see in the dark”  
the angels responded.  
And it was the truth,  
when the faucets were open  
that God did not see  
they did not have water  
And never again  
did the children ask  
“Why?” (Horvit, 1998)

The composer Michael Horvit intentionally kept his musical setting of these poems sparse and restrained as well, to match the naïve tone of the poems and to reflect, in his words “the

wonderment of innocent children who could not fully comprehend the horrors they faced in the Holocaust” (McCullough 1999). This child-like simplicity of the text and the music, and also the childhood innocence it represents, are some of the most moving and beautiful aspects of this set of pieces.

Another important aspect of Holocaust music and our experience of it is our understanding that performing and listening to Holocaust pieces today is an act of commemoration and memorialization. Experiencing Holocaust music today is an act of remembrance. By listening we are saying “we remember the millions who suffered and died, and we remember the millions more who survived but were never the same.” This type of cultural work is sometimes explicit—as in the cantata *Di Naye Hagode*, whose text charges the Jewish community to remember the Warsaw Ghetto fighters every year in the same way that they remember the Exodus every year, in a new haggadic ritual. And it is sometimes tacit, as in the poems and music of *A Child’s Journey*, which provide an unspoken invitation to us to remember and contemplate the special suffering of children of the Holocaust. This act of respectful remembrance is part of our experience of the music, and, I would argue, helps to make our experience of the music meaningful and beautiful. We react not only to the stories and the sounds we hear in the music but the very act of commemoration.

The act of memorialization through musical activity also goes a long way to explaining how it is that Holocaust music can have a redemptive and healing effect despite the deep suffering to which it alludes. The themes of music of the Holocaust are some of the darkest imaginable, including unspeakable violence, the tragic death of millions, the depravity of humankind, and the silence of God. At its worst, dwelling on such themes has the potential to become a kind of glorification of horror, violence, and sin and may even, as some have worried, blind us to the evils of our own time (Kimmelman 2009). But at its best, our acknowledgement and articulation of these dark themes allows us to pay tribute to those who suffered, and ensures that we will not add to the tragedy of the Holocaust by forgetting its victims.

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND the ways in which music affects us and shapes our world, we need to understand music as far more than an object but also as a social and cultural experience rooted in a specific place, time, group of people, and circumstances. As I hope my various examples have shown, performing and listening to Holocaust music cannot be fully understood if it is analyzed entirely in terms of an act of detached aesthetic contemplation. Listening to Holocaust music is far more than this. Other actions hovering around the musical space are the construction of identity, the interpretation of musical meaning, and the performance of memorialization, to name only those discussed here. Each of these acts affects our experience of the music generally and our experience of the meaning and *beauty* of the music specifically.

I’d like to leave you with the suggestion that what seems true in the music of the Holocaust is true in all our musical experiences, although it is perhaps less obvious and less profound. We delude ourselves if we believe that we can fully understand a musical experience by scrutinizing the formal aspects of a musical work alone. Our experience of a piece of music always will be shaped to a significant degree by the context in which we experience it. Furthermore, I would

argue that if musical experiences are indeed that deeply embedded in the fabric of human life and are open to all the good and evil of humanity, that it is our responsibility as scholars, and as Christian scholars in particular, to study and understand this experience. The study of music of all types from this perspective becomes a study of our place in the world and an act of Christian discernment.

**Benita Wolters-Fredlund** is Assistant Professor of Music at Calvin College. In its original setting this lecture included five listening examples--two were performed live by the Seattle Pacific University Concert Choir and three were recordings. Those interested in hearing these excerpts may consider listening to a podcast of the lecture, which can be downloaded from iTunes University.