

The Power of Jewish Music

By Nora Gold

What is it about music? It can affect us like nothing else in the world. It has the power to move us to tears, fill us with joy, or set our fingers tapping and our legs dancing. Oliver Sacks, in his book *Musicophilia*, shows that music can animate people with Parkinson's disease who cannot otherwise move, give words to stroke patients who cannot otherwise speak, and calm and organize people whose memories are ravaged by Alzheimer's or amnesia. Sacks writes (p. xi): "Listening to music is not just auditory and emotional, it is motoric as well: 'We listen to music with our muscles,' as Nietzsche said."

I have always loved music and it has always been an important part of my life. So perhaps it is no coincidence that my new novel, *The Dead Man* (which came out this week), is about a woman who is a composer of Jewish sacred music and also a music therapist.

I did not grow up with Jewish music. I heard the shofar once a year at shul, and on the holidays we sang a few songs, but mainly the music I heard at home was classical. Jewish music is something I discovered on my own in adolescence, and I've been hooked on it ever since.

The term "Jewish music" is problematic to some scholars because it is so all-encompassing, but even so, this term persists. Here (from the Jewish Virtual Library) is the briefest summary of what the field of Jewish music includes: "[It] encompasses many genres of religious, semi-religious, and folk music used in the synagogue and in the Jewish home, and also art music using Jewish texts or themes. ... Jewish music today encompasses a wide diversity of musical traditions."

I have heard Jewish music from most of these traditions and genres, and I love almost every kind. The type I listen to the most, though, is Jewish-themed art (or classical) music. I first encountered this sort of music as a young adult after I moved to Toronto, the home of the (then-living) composer, Srul Irving Glick. His music blew me away. I didn't know anything like this existed and it opened up a whole world to me. I'd been familiar, of course, with the music of Mendelssohn, and I knew he was Jewish. But just as not all fiction authored by Jews is Jewish fiction, not all music written by Jewish composers is Jewish music. So Glick's music was a revelation for me. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Glick's music shows up in my novel *The Dead Man*,

including his brilliant “Music for Passover,” parts of which my family sang a few weeks ago at our seder.

Another composer whose work I love is Salamone Rossi, the extraordinary 16th century Italian composer who wrote the first Jewish-themed classical music. I was introduced to Rossi at a concert performed by the Jewish choir Lachan, where my husband for several years sang baritone. That concert offered a chronological sampling of Jewish choral music (one piece per century), starting with Rossi. I was so bowled over by this piece by him that I didn’t hear anything the choir sang after that. Needless to say, Rossi’s music (like Glick’s) makes an appearance in *The Dead Man*.

What is it about music that affects us so powerfully? Sacks writes in *Musicophilia*, (pp. 300-301): “Music, uniquely among the arts, is both completely abstract and profoundly emotional... It needs no mediation... Music can pierce the heart directly.” And I think he’s right.

As for the power of Jewish music in particular, music can serve many functions: emotional, social, and cultural. Jewish music not only gives us Jews pleasure and catharsis; it plays a role in binding us together as a community. Singing with other people, for example, is a transformative experience, communally and individually. I can’t even imagine contemporary Jewish life without music in it – at shul, at home, with friends. In my view, nothing could be more conducive to community- and identity-building than music.

Furthermore, Jewish music binds us to our shared historical past. One project I’m very excited about is the ARC Ensemble’s “Music in Exile” initiative, where they research, unearth, perform, and record the suppressed music of Jewish composers who were forced to flee Germany in the 1930s. The salvaging and revitalizing of this music by the ARC Ensemble (which is based at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto) is an immeasurably precious gift to our people, restoring to us a missing piece from our musical past.

As for our musical future, what lies ahead for Jewish music? A few weeks ago I saw Steve Reich in concert and heard the performance of his masterpiece, *Tehillim*. This was a remarkable experience, and not necessarily an easy one: it challenged some of my most basic assumptions about music. Reich, an observant Jew, has pushed the boundaries of Jewish music, and music

in general, quite a few inches, or maybe even miles, from where it was before. His *Tehillim* is different Jewish music from anything you've ever heard.

But wow, how exciting it is! And I can't wait to see what happens next with Jewish music!

Nora Gold's books include *The Dead Man* (May 2016), *Fields of Exile* (which won the 2015 Canadian Jewish Literary Award), and *Marrow and Other Stories* (winner of a Canadian Jewish Book Award and praise from Alice Munro). Gold is the editor of the prestigious literary journal *Jewish Fiction .net* and the Writer-in-Residence at the Centre for Women's Studies in Education, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto.