

## **Christian Music in Israel: A Religious, Cultural, and Cross-Cultural Perspective**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to provide a general assessment of the various layers of Christian music in Israel. The term “Christian music” is commonly associated with the Western musical tradition the past eight centuries or so. Since some of the churches in the Holy Land were founded by crusaders and missionaries, who brought their musical traditions with them, while others are autochthonous churches with their own music, a variety of church musical traditions may be observed in the field. In addition, while in the West, Christian believers attend concerts where Christian music is performed, Christian believers in Israel and listeners of Western-style Christian music in Israel are different audiences. A brief overview of the new music written by Israeli composers on Christian texts completes the range of issues discussed in the article.

**Keywords:** Christian music, church music, Israel, cross-cultural perspective

### **Introduction**

There is probably no other place in the world where Christian music is as diverse as in Israel. On the other hand, there is probably no other place where Christian music is so little studied as in Israel. The scope of this essay is not aimed at studying the subject in full, but at providing an outline of the problem from a cross-cultural perspective, taking various historical, social, and cultural aspects into account. The review will look at the music of modern-day Christian communities, concert performances and broadcasting of various genres of church music and, finally, new compositions on Christian texts written by professional Israeli composers. The subject will be addressed from different points of reference using the author’s personal database, which contains about forty field audio recordings and other ethnographic materials collected during two field studies of local church music,<sup>1</sup> as well as many years of personal experience as a harpsichordist-performer.

Surprisingly, especially considering the fact that church music gave rise to the Western musical tradition, there is no reliable information about the origin of Christian music itself. That is, the music of the Christian church, before it was rendered into the

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<sup>1</sup> See Alexander Rosenblatt, “Music of the Arab-Anglicans in Israel: Dynamics of Ethno-Religious Identity,” *Sociology Study* 4/7 (2014): 649–59; and Alexander Rosenblatt, “Maronite Music Today: The Local and Global Models,” *International Journal of Arts and Sciences* 11/1 (2018): 203–12.

notation and modes of Gregorian chants, remains the subject of assumptions and hypotheses. Jeffery describes this situation by asking a series of rhetorical questions:

What were the melodies of the old local repertoires like, and how were they created, taught and performed? How were the text and melodies collected and organized into the great annual cycle of the liturgical year? How were the principles of performance practice worked out and codified? How did the eight-mode system originate and become so widely adopted? Unfortunately, this and other such questions will not be answered easily. Our very sources of information—liturgical books, ordinals, notation—were themselves products of the move towards uniformity and standardization.<sup>2</sup>

Does this mean that, in any case, there were *several* musical traditions that were gradually forged into a single musical style suitable for worship? If so, what were the sources of these traditions? Researchers, ethnographers, and local knowledge agree that one such location was obviously Jerusalem, where the first Christian rite was established, the musical traces of which might be found in Georgian, Syriac, Armenian, and Latin repertoires.<sup>3</sup>

The political, religious, and cultural circumstances in Israel define the special status of Christian culture in general, and its musical manifestations in particular. The Jewish State embraces different ethno-religious groups, including some two percent who are Christians—mostly Arabic-speaking citizens of the country. That is, about 120,000 Christians belong to ten officially recognized churches<sup>4</sup> that were founded in different periods: from the beginning of Christianity, by the Crusaders and Templars, and by missionaries. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem is a multicultural Christian complex maintained by a Turkish family. The basic attitude of the state toward religious pluralism found expression in the 1948 Declaration of Independence:

The State of Israel ... will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Jeffery, *Re-Envisioning Past Musical Cultures: Ethnomusicology in the Study of Gregorian Chant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 8–9.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Jeffery, “The Earliest Christian Chant Repertory Recovered: The Georgian Witnesses to Jerusalem Chant,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47/1 (1994): 1–38 (p. 38). Amir Khalloul-Risha, who is an authority on Maronite tradition and music in the Galilee, Northern Israel, maintained in an interview with the author on 6 April 2016 that the music of the Syriac churches (to which the Maronite church belongs, historically and culturally) presumably may come from the musical practices of the Second Temple.

<sup>4</sup> Christian communities officially recognized in Israel are: the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Orthodox, the Syriac Orthodox, the Roman Catholic (Latin), the Maronite, the Greek Catholic (Melkite), the Syriac Catholic, the Armenian Catholic, the Chaldean Catholic, and the Episcopal (Anglican). Retrieved from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel:

<https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/aboutisrael/people/pages/focus%20on%20israel%20-%20the%20christian%20communities%20of%20isr.aspx>, accessed 19 January 2019.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.archives.gov.il/en/chapter/the-declaration-of-independence>, accessed 21 January 2019.

The diversity of local churches in Israel may impress those who are unfamiliar with church services other than those associated with Byzantine or Roman rites. Most Eastern churches follow the Antiochene rite, which originated in the second (after Jerusalem) Christian school in Antioch (now the ruins near Antakya, Turkey), where, according to the Bible, Christians “were first called Christians.”<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning here that most Ashkenazi Jews, who make up about half of the Jewish population of Israel, accept Western culture, including classical music on Christian texts, as their own. Soker, for example, argues that for Alexander Uriah Boskovich (1907–64), one of the notable Israeli composers of the first generation, the East was “the radical other of *his* Western civilization.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Local Church Music**

What is known about the music of the liturgical service in the local churches in Israel? What is the status of research and documentation in this field?

To date, 280 audio recordings of worship-related events in local churches appear in the catalog of the National Library of Israel; most of these are digitized and available for listening online. These recordings were made between 1953 and 2017 by ten ethnographers in various churches in Israel. As experience shows, some recordings are of questionable quality in terms of reliability and content. Thus, it took the author time (and the advice of a specialist in the Maronite tradition) to verify and reassemble in the correct order the five audio recordings in the Maronite churches made by three ethnographers in the 1960s–70s. The verified recordings, together with new recordings of the “second round” made by the author in the same churches on the same day of the church calendar fifty years later (in 2016–17), were transferred to the National Library. Yet, most of the audio recordings stored there have not been deciphered or investigated. Only two researchers who recorded worship in churches in Israel studied the material in the framework of their doctoral studies—Dalia Cohen on the Arab Orthodox communities in the mid-1960s and the author on the Arab–Anglican communities at the beginning of the 2010s. Both researches were carried out at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In the mid-1990s, *Holyland Records* was established in Jerusalem with the purpose of documenting Christian music in the Holy Land from an artistic perspective: the music of the Christian communities was recorded along with the choral recordings of pilgrims on the eve of the third millennium. As a result of this activity, a commercial series of forty CDs was released: *Chants from the Holy Land*.

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 11: 26.

<sup>7</sup> Tal Soker, “The Mediterranean Style: From Pan-Semitism to Israeli Nationalism,” in *Music, Longing and Belonging: Articulations of the Self and the Other in Musical Realm*, ed. Magdalena Waligórska (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 82–93 (p. 86).

In general, the music of most local churches in Israel consists of a large portion of traditional tunes characteristic of each particular church, tunes borrowed from other local churches, and contemporary Christian songs, imported or composed by local staff. Thus, Byzantine psalms, Gregorian chants, Syriac chants, Armenian chants, and Anglican hymns belong to such a legacy, part of which is normally sung during the liturgical service. Paraliturgical events offer a larger proportion of contemporary songs, especially considering that they are often interdenominational gatherings that follow ecumenical ideology. Such are, for example, summer camps for youth of Christian families living in Nazareth and the Galilee, where various Christian songs are sung in Arabic and English, accompanied by guitar. Another kind of paraliturgical event is community gatherings where people, mostly middle-aged community members, sing together the Christian songs of their youth, led by the community leader (that is, the clergyman). Fr. Bilal Habibi (The Savior Church, Kafr Yassif) argues that “music is much more than just a language to connect people.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, individuals from many local Arab–Christian communities attend family prayers on Wednesdays at the Savior Church. This multi-confessional attendance at the church is largely attracted by the music sung and played by the gifted musician Shadi Said and his ensemble. This musician has collected songs from all over the world, and just “baptizes secular tunes with the right words,” says Fr. Habibi.<sup>9</sup>

The continuum of the Arab–Christian songs, as currently presented in Israel, consists of four basic categories: classic Arabic songs; Oriental Christian songs of Lebanese and Egyptian origin; songs of Christian content influenced by Anglo-American rock; and songs for children. Folk songs and contemporary popular songs in Arabic are not part of this continuum, even though they might be heard at the life-cycle events.

Church concerts intended for community members also present performances of various Christian songs in either Arabic or English. Thus, at the interdenominational church concert held at the Basilica of Annunciation (Nazareth, 20 December 2009), a school students’ band sang a succession of Christmas songs in Arabic. A concert at St. Paul’s, Shfar’am (28 May 2009) was given by a guest from the UK, who sang the entire program of 1960s Christian rock songs, accompanying himself on guitar and mouth-organ. Some of the local churches open their doors to concerts for larger audiences (usually on Saturdays)—but this is a different story, different music, and other people. This is one of the topics that will be discussed in the next section.

## **Concert Performance of Christian Music**

By the end of the nineteenth century, liturgical music in the Western church had already seriously influenced the duration of church service, sometimes turning liturgical worship into a kind of concert in which there was no room for a spoken (not a sung) word. Once

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Fr. Bilal Habibi, 26 June 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

the Vatican had realized the problem, on 22 November 1903, Pope Pius X issued a papal directive that clearly stated the following regarding the music of liturgy:

Gregorian Chant has always been regarded as the supreme model for sacred music, so that it is fully legitimate to lay down the following rule: the more closely a composition for church approaches in its movement, inspiration and savor the Gregorian form, the more sacred and liturgical it becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with that supreme model, the less worthy it is of the temple.

The ancient traditional Gregorian Chant must, therefore, in a large measure be restored to the functions of public worship, and the fact must be accepted by all that an ecclesiastical function loses none of its solemnity when accompanied by this music alone.<sup>10</sup>

The meaning of this directive was that early twentieth-century composers were no longer encouraged by the Catholic Church to write new compositions of liturgical content unless they were based on the medieval tunes. Within a decade, the situation already seemed as if “the essence of high Mass is not the music but the deacon and subdeacon.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the Western Church became so critical of music at the beginning of the twentieth century that it was ready to abandon it, rather than let the music set the ceremony. As a result, the rich volume of Christian music of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries gradually moved to concert halls, performed by secular singers, choirs, and musicians. This was the time when European Jewry found itself between attempts at assimilation into European culture and understanding the need to leave Europe for a safer place.

While Western classical music was an essential part of the cultural identity and emotional experience of many people in the West, Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to *Eretz Israel* in the 1920s and '30s were no exception. In 1936, the Palestine Symphony Orchestra was established in Tel Aviv (from 1948, The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra) in order to maintain a high quality performance of Western-type classical music and to properly employ the professional orchestral musicians who were arriving in British Mandate Palestine. Other orchestras were founded, and cultural centers with appropriate concert halls were built in many of the country's cities.

The repertoire of classical music available to members of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine (1920–48) included, in particular, Christian music of the Classic and Romantic periods, relegated by the Catholic Church to a somewhat secular—that is concert—repertoire. The time to perform Baroque Christian music would come with the emergence of the historically informed, or “authentic,” performance of the so-called “early music.” This movement came to Israel from the European countries and the Boston area (MA, USA), where it started in the early 1950s. During the 1980s, the first harpsichords of

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<sup>10</sup> *Tra Le Sollecitudini* Instruction on Sacred Music. <https://adoremus.org/1903/11/22/tra-le-sollecitudini>, accessed 22 January 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Fortesque, “Mass, Ceremony of the.” In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al., Vol. 9 (New York: The Encyclopedia Press: 1913), 789–800 (p. 799).

“historical building” became available to Israeli musicians and organizations, largely due to the generous activity of Dutch harpsichord builder Gerrit Klop (1935–2018). The annual international workshops for early music began in Jerusalem, where the Christian Baroque repertoire played an essential role. The annual festival of liturgical music in Abu Gosh (where concerts were held in churches) has become part of the most respected cultural events in the country. These concerts, as well as other events where Christian music is performed, have been broadcast by the Voice of Music station of the Israel Broadcasting Authority. Finally, in December 2018, in Tel Aviv, with the support of the Israel Musicological Society, an academic conference was held on various aspects of the historically informed performance in Israel.

The audience in all the above-mentioned events, both artistic and academic, are secular and moderately religious Jews. Orthodox Jews normally avoid attending concerts held in churches, although they can attend concerts of Christian music in concert halls. An Arabic-speaking Christian audience does not usually attend such concerts, since the musical style of these events is very different from the musical style of paraliturgical events of this community, and is not resonant with its musical tradition.

### **Intercultural Dialogue in Israeli Music**

The dialogue with the Western tradition has actually been on the agenda of synagogue music in European countries (and vice versa—the dialogue of Christian music with Hebrew heritage) since the late Renaissance. Thus, Salamone Rossi (1570–1630), an Italian–Jewish composer, wrote several choral works on Hebrew texts in a style appropriate to the place and time. Jacobs, discussing the origin and multiple appearances of the Hebrew Hanukkah song *Maoz Tzur* in European music, including Handel’s oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus*, writes:

We should be grateful to George Frederic Handel, who thoughtfully supplied us with several Old Testament oratorios as every bit as resplendent as “Messiah,” including a few tailor-made for specific holidays: “Israel in Egypt” for Passover, “Esther” for Purim, and “Judas Maccabaeus” for Hanukkah. In composing the last one, Handel seemed to have been deliberately trying to replicate the structure and feel of “Messiah,” perhaps consciously trying to please the Jewish merchants who made up a large part of his London audience. It worked: While it’s less well known today, it was one of Handel’s most popular works in his lifetime.<sup>12</sup>

Cristiano Giuseppe Lidarti (1730–93), an Austrian composer of Italian descent, wrote several works based on Hebrew texts, commissioned by the Jewish community of Amsterdam. These works, the most famous of which is the oratorio *Esther*, combine the

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<sup>12</sup> James D. Jacobs, “Songs for Your Hanukkah Playlist.” *Moment*, 16 December 2016. Retrieved 26 January 2019, from <https://www.momentmag.com/songs-hanukkah-playlist>.

Italian style with the Judeo–Spanish (Sephardic) musical tradition, since the target audience of the work were the descendants of Jews expelled from Spain at the end of the fifteenth century.

The nineteenth century was especially prolific in shaping the new musical style of the Jewish synagogue service in the countries of Central Europe, compatible with the European musical tradition. Among the notable musicians who contributed to the Jewish liturgy of that period were Salomon Sulzer (1804–90) and Louis Lewandowski (1821–94). Sulzer was an Austrian *hazzan* (cantor) and composer who “established models for the various sections of the musical service” in synagogues, and was recognized as “the father of the modern cantorate.”<sup>13</sup> Lewandowski, in turn, wrote liturgical music for choir, soloists, and organ, being an adherent of congregational singing in synagogues. His music combines the strict four-part technique of church music with ancient cantorial modal melodies and, at the same time, introduces “a new romantic style heavily influenced by the music of Felix Mendelssohn.”<sup>15</sup> To this very day, it is part of the repertoire in both the Reform and the Orthodox Jewish communities across the world.

The musical elements of the synagogue service in the countries of Central Europe by the beginning of the twentieth century were thus quite reminiscent of the Christian ministry of the not-so-distant past: a soloist-cantor, choir, and organ were its integral components. Yet, the *bel canto* style of cantorial singing was as “operatic” as paraliturgical Christian music of the period. The Holocaust, however, substantially reduced, and in most places terminated, the musical tradition of European Jewry in European countries. The humble attempts in Israeli music to connect between Jewish history, the Israeli present, Ashkenazi cantorial tradition (which, due to historical circumstances, is not part of Israeli religious experience), and Christian legacy began only in the 1960s, on a basis of both the liturgical and the paraliturgical compositions.

In 1964, Yehezkel Braun (1922–2014), an Israeli composer, was commissioned to write a Shabbat Evening Prayer for the centennial of the Cleveland Jewish community (Ohio, USA). The piece, written for a male soloist (cantor), a choir, and a small organ, was first performed in Cleveland at a festive Shabbat service in 1966. The composer’s interest in Gregorian chant helped him establish in this work a true bridge between the old Jewish musical tradition and its later development following its contact and dialogue with the Western tradition of church music and *bel canto*. The Shabbat Evening Prayer remains “the only liturgical–functional piece written by Braun, and its choral–responsorial style, is an exception among his other choral works.”<sup>16</sup> The premiere of the composition in Israel took place only in 2003, during the “Days of Music in the Upper Galilee” festival, where some details of this work were discussed in the author’s conversation with the composer.

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<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14109-sulzer-salomon>, attached 28 March 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/louis-lewandowski>, attached 28 March 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Jehoash Hirshberg, “Choral Works.” In Yehezkel Braun, Rotem Luz, & Jehoash Hirshberg, *Yehezkel Braun. His Life and Work* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv: Israel Music Institute, 2017), 211–64 (p. 231).

There are only few works, written by Israeli (Jewish) composers that directly follow the liturgical genres of Christian music. One of these compositions is *Requiem* (2006) by Gil Shohat (b. 1973). Commissioned by Spain's *Conjunto Iberico* cello ensemble (six voices, eight celli), the *Requiem* was written using the traditional Latin texts and, according to *Jerusalem Post*, is "one of four vocal works *Conjunto* ordered from contemporary composers throughout the world."<sup>17</sup> The work, which employs the techniques of modern classical music, was first performed at Capella Amsterdam on 18 March 2006 and was later recorded for CD release. Until today, however, it has not been addressed by musicologists or other scholars. Another work of this genre, *Requiem* (2017) by Aaron Harlap (b. 1941) is written in a quite traditional way on Latin texts of non-canonical content, although parts of the composition are assigned Latin names that are traditional to this genre. It is rather the composer's contemplations on life and death, dictated by the bitterness of the loss of his colleagues in recent years. The *Requiem* is dedicated to Stanley Sperber, a conductor who performed about twenty premieres of Harlap's works.<sup>18</sup> Sperber conducted the premiere performance of the *Requiem* at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in May 2017.

The ecumenical approach to religious texts in concert music is clearly traced in the works of Josef Bardanashvili (b. 1946), an Israeli composer of Georgian–Jewish origin. Before his arrival in Israel, he was probably "the only [Soviet] professional composer who was seriously engaged in Jewish synagogue music."<sup>19</sup> Bardanashvili wrote three works at the crossroads of religious traditions: "Children of God" on texts from the Talmud, the New Testament, the Psalms, and the Quran (1997); "Haleluyah–Magnificat" on Hebrew, Yiddish, and traditional Latin texts (2014); and "The Passion of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai" (2016) on texts from the Zohar (the major work on Kabbalah). The composer himself considers these works to be a triptych.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in all these works, the approach to sacred subjects is quite similar. However, the perspective of the topic varies subtly from work to work. Thus, the first part of the triptych has a wide range of musical styles and a selection of texts. The second part is an attempt to follow the musical style of the Baroque, weaving into it the features of the composer's own language, while the traditional Latin texts of the *Magnificat* coexist with religious Hebrew texts and the lyrics of traditional Yiddish songs. The third part is written solely on sacred Jewish texts, and its musical style is far more minimalist and close to early Christian modality.

Another fresh view of Christian subjects in music from an Israeli perspective was offered by Avia Kopelman (b. 1978) in a Hebrew *Magnificat* (2005). Originally performed by the Tel Aviv Chamber Choir, and later edited and re-orchestrated for symphonic

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<sup>17</sup> *Jerusalem Post*, 9 February 2006. Retrieved 27 January 2019 from <https://www.jpost.com/Arts-and-Culture/Entertainment/News-of-the-Muse-12727>.

<sup>18</sup> According to the interview with Prof. Stanley Sperber. *News of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance* 13 (February–May 2017).

<sup>19</sup> According to Marina Ritzarev, *Josef Bardanashvili: Life in 3D: Conversations with the Composer* (Russian). (Tel Aviv: VeDiScore, 2016), 99.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Josef Bardanashvili, 27 March 2019.



orchestra (2017), the piece, 37-minutes long, is set to Latin, German, and Hebrew texts and presents various aspects of maternity. Expanding the classical form of the Magnificat (as a praise to motherhood) to a wider perspective of the theme, dealing with “the sorrow of bringing forth children, the tragedy of child loss,”<sup>21</sup> etc., using a multicultural view through texts from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, along with verses by Rainer Maria Rilke and the Israeli poetesses Rachel and Yona Wollach, this work is a real milestone in rethinking the common pasts of Judaism and Christianity in the global era.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing various forms of Christian music in Israel, the article discusses the religious and cultural identities of Israelis who are: a) Christian believers for whom church music is part of their ethno-religious and cultural identity; b) listeners of Christian music for whom Christian music is part of Western culture and, subsequently, of their own cultural identity; and c) creators of music related to a Christian context for whom this is a desired intercultural field to enter a dialog with the far and not-so-distant past. The diversity of Christian music in Israel—the liturgical music of the autochthonous churches, the concert performance of Western Christian music, and the writing of music related to Christian themes by Jewish composers—all this represents various aspects of a cross-cultural perspective, the review of which was the main purpose of this article.

The author expresses the hope that researchers of various disciplinary affiliations will contribute to the exploration of the subject of Christian music in Israel, taking various angles of this broad field into account. The audio recordings stored in the National Library of Israel await deciphering, being themselves an excellent basis for a longitudinal study of sociocultural changes in Christian communities located in Israel. The history of the “authentic performance” of early music in Israel is an exciting field of research, particularly when taking into account the fact that two renowned builders of revival harpsichords, William de Blaise and Eric Herz, played flute in the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra before establishing their workshops in the UK and USA, respectively. A focused review of modern-day Israeli classical music associated with the Christian heritage can itself be a topic of study.

The attempt to bring together the various problems pertaining to this issue was dictated by the idea of re-examining the cross-cultural perspective on the Christian element, taking into account the musical utterances of various demographic and cultural groups of people living in the Holy Land, once the Kingdom of Israel, and now the State of Israel.

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<sup>21</sup> As the composer explains the emotional content of her work. Retrieved 27 January 2019 from <https://soundcloud.com/aviya-kopelman/sets/hebrew-magnificat>.

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