

Jewish Religious Music

The Jewish people have their homeland in Israel, but the branches of their family tree reach out to all corners of the world as a result of immigration due to persecution, displacement, and various other natural factors. Despite this, a rich tradition of music developed and has continued to develop from ancient times until today. In Judaism, music plays an integral role in the practice of the faith. The history of Jewish religious music in Biblical times is rich and full of deep symbolism and significance. Some of the various types include cantorial music, nusah, cantillation, and piyyutim. Each type of music has an important part to play.

As far back as the time of the First Temple in Jerusalem, Levite priests were given the job of singing songs and playing instruments like harps, lyres, cymbals, drums, and trumpets during the services in the Temple. These were performed while animal sacrifices were taking place. After the exile to Babylon, there was a shift in the focus of Temple worship. The recitation of prayers began to take precedence. The siddur, or Jewish prayer book, came at a time in the people's history when very few could read or write. The prayers had to be memorized and music seemed to be the most effective mnemonic device to aid them to this end. From this, prayer chants were born. Templegoers recited these to a tune playing in the background.

When the Second Temple was destroyed, music changed drastically. Instead of rejoicing, people were in a period of deep mourning. Rabbis no longer allowed the Levites to play instruments during times of prayer to symbolize the great sadness that had fallen upon them. However, even though the prayer songs were no longer in use, there were still a great number of people who could not read from the prayer book. The Talmud allowed for cases such as this by creating a new position called the shaliah tzibbur, or "messenger of the community." The shaliah tzibbur chanted the prayer out loud, effectively covering everyone within hearing distance, whether they could read or not. This position later became known as hazzan, or the cantor, of the service.

Each day had a different nusah, or musical formula, that told the cantors what tune to use. Each Jewish community developed slightly different nusah, depending on the region. Sections of the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Writings are also read aloud three times per week. The musical notations for their melodies are noted in the cantillation.

Structured songs with a distinct rhythm came into practice around the fifth century. These poetic songs are called piyyutim, and when these are performed both the words and the rhythm are of special interest. These songs were also used in the synagogue service.

An instrument important to Jewish religious tradition is the shofar, a hollowed-out ram's horn. In Biblical times, the shofar announced the Sabbath and declared important dates like the New Moon or the anointing of a new king. It also sounded loud and clear on the mornings of Rosh Hashanah and at the end of Yom Kippur.

This served as a reminder to pray, repent, and draw near to God. These traditions are still in place today as one part of Judaism's very rich, historical musical tradition.

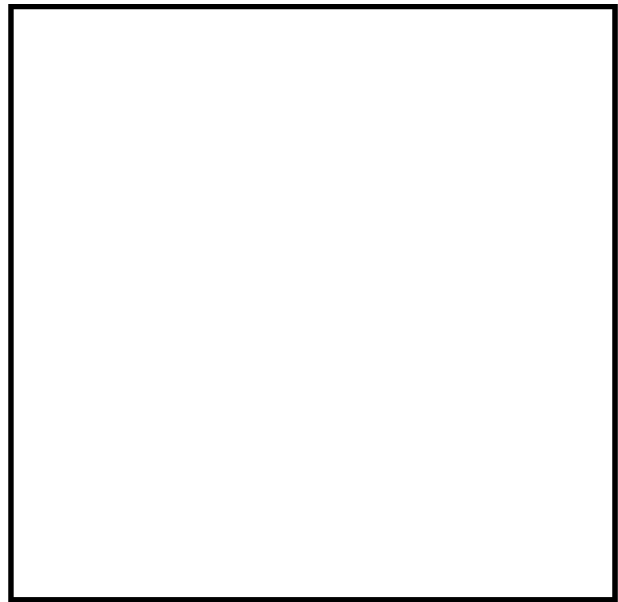
Composer Study

Name: _____

Date of Birth: _____

Place of Birth: _____

Composer Fun Facts:



Instruments Used: _____

Famous Compositions: _____

Further Study:
