

THE HASIDIC NIGUN—ETHOS AND MELOS OF A FOLK LITURGY

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Abridged

HASIDISM, the last of the Jewish mystical movements, created a characteristic wordless vocal melody which is called in Hebrew *nigun*. These nigunim are often used as an extension of the existing liturgy, and serve as a prelude or postlude to the traditional prayers; there may even be devotional gatherings during which only these nigunim are heard.

Hasidism originated in Eastern Europe about 1750. It spread quickly over the Jewish diaspora in the Slavic countries, and is still alive in many communities such as Jerusalem, Safad, London, New York and elsewhere. It is the latest, but not the sole mystical movement that attracted masses of the people. Disastrous persecutions were often followed by a withdrawal of the Jews into an inner life beyond grim reality. After the fatal onslaught of the crusaders there arose, late in the twelfth century, a sect called "The Pious of Ashkenaz"; the expulsion from Spain was followed by the mystical doctrines radiating from Safad in Upper Galilee; and the unbearable suppression of the Russian diaspora gave birth to Hasidism. All these movements differ from the more exclusive, speculative Cabala in stressing an esoteric way of life, and supplying practical guidance suited to everybody. They aim at a daily life brought close to God by striving for joy in His service, and for a complete merger of personality in ecstatic prayer. These are the main motives for the preference given to musical expression. Words were regarded as a medium which was insufficient for grasping the secrets of cabalistic theosophy, and for the exalted feelings of union with the endless and absolute. There are sayings such as "Silence is better than words, but singing is better than silence," or "There are castles in the upper spheres which open only to song." An unbroken line of thought ranges from the medieval Pious over the tenets of Safad to modern Hasidism.

Hasidism developed its own manner of praying based largely on song. All this was a continuation of the ideas of medieval mystics, such as Y'hudah the Pious who said: "Whoever is unable to arrange his words well, should express his supplication, praise or penitence by means of melodies, and especially by extended, melismatic tunes." The same author stressed that in prayer-song aesthetic values are of no

importance—devotion is what counts; therefore, nobody should feel ashamed of his poor vocal gifts. This idea is recapitulated in the Safad circles, and still holds true in Hasidism.

Such trends of thought offer a clue to many popular and folkloristic traits in the music of Jewish mysticism. "Offer your heart in chant just as it is, and sing as well as you can though it be nothing but the rustic songs and dances of the countryside where you live in exile." There is a mystic idea that also tunes are in exile, and may be liberated by leading them back to serve a holy purpose. Consequently, all the doors were opened to the influx of foreign musical forms and styles, but they were remodelled. There is a tendency to suggest in song a gradual rise from the depths of this world to the higher spheres of the transcendent, to holy joy, enthusiasm, ecstasy. This may be achieved by means of gradually raising the pitch level of the same motive, by abrupt changes in, or continuous acceleration of, time, by obstinate repetition of short motives, by the introduction of unusual intervals, and so on.

The Hasidic nigon is most often sung without words, in short, stammering syllables interrupted by exclamations of joy or grief: it aims to express the unexpressible, to give voice to that which is too intimate to be uttered in words.

There are three main classes of nigonim: First, the solo song of the rabbi. This may be intended to reveal the deep, unspeakable mysteries of the Cabala, or to penetrate the upper spheres by the fervour of its supplication. The second class of melodies serves for the communion of the individual soul with its Creator. The third and most common type is the congregational song heard at meetings of the Hasidic fraternities. Legends tell how such nigonim changed and improved the character of the partakers—the *katharsis* of Plato.

The Hasid is taught that he should sing "not in order to affect others, but in order to affect himself." Thus the tunes of this secluded microcosm are not aimed at any audience, do not strive for external beauty, and cannot be measured by purely artistic standards. Only by means of participation can their ravishing, moving, exalting power be realized.

In the following example, the music hovers between strict rhythm and free recitative. Sometimes it suggests a discussion with an unseen partner; it appears to argue, persuade, convince—a speech without words. It is worth noting that the Hasidic "talking melody" does not follow any of the patterns of the synagogal recitative. It prefers the style of certain Wallachian farmer-and-shepherd songs with their strong speech-like character.



Dance is regarded in Hasidism, like song, as a holy medium and a particular expression of devotion. The sacred dance of times immemorial is thus found in

modern mysticism. The following is a dance-nigun, an authentic old specimen, recorded in writing before 1792.

m.s. Aharon Ber (1792)

The musical score consists of four staves of music in 2/4 time. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It contains a section labeled 'A' followed by two first and second endings. The second staff continues the melody and includes a section labeled 'B' and 'C'. The third staff features a section labeled 'D var.' and includes a 'Fine' marking. The fourth staff is labeled 'Ahavah rabah - Shteyger:' and includes the instruction 'follows A, B, C. (D.C. al Fine)'. The score is marked with various musical notations including notes, rests, and repeat signs.

This tune is in one of the synagogal modes called, according to a prayer text, *Ahavah rabah Shteyger*, that means, "Mode of the Great Love of God"; it is very often used for Hasidic nigunim.

The features of dance are found in the taut rhythms, in the syncopations, and in the use of several bars which bridge the various sections (beginning of Part D). Such bridging bars are known to us from Polish dances such as the *Oberek*, as well as from the Viennese Waltz and the like. Specific Jewish tradition is at work not only in the mode, but also in the principle of varied repetition which is applied to Part D.

This short survey had to be limited to basic information on the ideas underlying the utilization of music in Hasidism. At first glance, Hasidic song may appear to be but a queer mixture of modern and old, of Hebrew and gentile elements, of holy and profane. Although it sometimes may resemble "much ado about nothing," we must nevertheless give it credit for its ever renewed attempt to bring about an unusual concentration of the entire personality, and for its aiming at a spiritual tension which is resolved in self-denial. All this has to be achieved by musical means. Hasidic song often starts from the trivial, but is ever directed at the most uplifted exaltation. This union of the upper and the lower worlds is accomplished in the heart of the singers, and may easily escape the casual observer. Special procedures of music-psychology will have to be developed in order to fathom the achievements of this very special type of religious music.

NOTES

1. J. S. Weisser, *Cantor's Manual*, Vol. I, p. 140, New York, 1944.
2. A. Z. Idelsohn, *Hebraeisch-orientalischer Melodienschatz*, Vol. X, no. 245, Leipzig, 1932.

Other music examples were drawn from:

- A. M. Bernstein, *Musikalischer Pinhas*, no. 12, 223, Wilna, 1927.
 M. Sh. Geshuri, *HaNigun w'haRiqud baHasiduth*, Vol. I, p. 239, Tel Aviv, 1955.
 Zalmanov, *loc cit.*, no. 5, 94.
 Bernstein, *loc cit.*, no. 210.
 Sh. Zalmanov, *Sefer haNigunim*, no. 22, 3, Brooklyn, 1948.

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- Walther Vetter, "Griechenland," *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, V, 840 ff.