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Introduction to Volume 15
Swing His Praises: Jazz, Blues, and Rock in Worship

By Neil W. Levin

The legendary orchestral bandleader Paul Whiteman, who commissioned George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue and premiered it at New York's Aeolian Hall in 1924 with Gershwin himself at the piano—and who brought a sense of symphonic aura to his jazz-and blues-related renditions—was supposedly once said to have "made an honest woman out of jazz."

The reference—a twist on a common expression of that generation—was partly to white America's original association of jazz not only with black life per se, but also with entertainment in houses of ill repute (to unearth another euphemism of the day) along the Mississippi on riverboats and on land. In fact, many black jazz musicians, during the formative years of the art form, became expatriates in Europe—France in particular—where their music was appreciated as a truly American art form rather than what was often dismissed as "inferior American imitations" in attempted extension of the European classical tradition. Parisians reacted with admiration, even awe. Meanwhile, for uptown white New Yorkers in those days, hearing authentic jazz usually necessitated a trip to Harlem (to clubs in which they were complete outsiders). The expression had another, related connotation. For a man to "make an honest woman" of his lover or mistress meant affording her social respectability by marrying her. Either way, the intended compliment to Whiteman suggested that jazz, once thought coarse, vulgar, and uncultured, had finally achieved its due respectability. It had gone from whorehouses to insular black clubs and parlors and then from uptown nightspots to Carnegie Hall.

Liberally extending and slightly tweaking the metaphor, we might say that the composers represented in this volume have made "honest" synagogue worship out of jazz—and of other related forms as well.

The exploration of jazz, blues, folk rock, and even rock idioms for sincere liturgical expression as a form of sacred music is a profoundly American phenomenon. But with the exception of Kurt Weill's blues-informed setting of the kiddush in 1946, it did not begin as a Jewish one. Its roots lie in some experiments in mainstream American churches, where, insofar as is known, the seeds were planted a bit earlier than in any synagogues. The years 1965 and 1966 frame the creation of the first full jazz synagogue services, yet some of the preceding trailblazing events within churches—and the public success they achieved—might well have served as both models and inspirations for the adventurous synagogue composers who followed.

Some jazz historians even assign the birth, or more likely the conception, of this improvisatory art form at least partly to the church. In that assessment, black slaves in the South and immediately succeeding generations are thought to have adapted harmonies and chord progressions of white church music they heard from outside to West African polyrhythmic and polytonal idioms.

In 1964, Lalo Schifrin composed his Roman Catholic jazz Mass, Jazz Suite on the Mass Texts, for flutist Paul Horn. Its recording won the 1965 Grammy for "best original jazz composition." Meanwhile, between 1965 and 1973, Duke Ellington wrote his three now famous "sacred concerts" or, more formally, Concerts of Sacred Music—large, expansive works that combine elements of jazz, Negro spirituals, gospel music, blues, choral church music, and even classical inflections, along with dance. The first of these, which amounted in its presentation to an exhilarating religious service of grand proportions, was premiered in 1965 at New York's Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, featuring Lena Horne and, of course, the composer ("the Duke"). The national attention it drew was instantaneous.

For Ellington, all three works were deeply felt religious experiences, exceeding, for him, any of his other achievements:

This music is the most important thing I've ever done or am likely to do. This is personal, not career. Now I can say out loud to all the world what I've been saying to myself for years on my knees.

Eventually these quasi-services were heard in churches and cathedrals not only across America, but throughout the world, offering an unprecedented fusion of jazz, spiritual reflection, and a form of worship. Ellington's Second Sacred Concert, at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, included a jazz orchestral setting of Psalm 150.

For many years, a jazz vespers service has been a regular feature on Sundays at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York. It was conducted there for nearly thirty years by the Reverend John Garcia Gensel, who, until his death in 1998, was considered the "pastor to the jazz community" in New York, a title attached to him in 1965. Committed to the value of jazz to religion (and religion to jazz)—not only as an adjunct but, in his words, as "probably the best music for worship" because it is "the personal expression of the person playing it." He was quoted in his obituary as proclaiming that it "speaks to the existential situation of a human being." He is reported to have responded to reservations about the kind of crowd potentially attracted to jazz services (regular nightclub attendees, for example, who might come only for the jazz), by saying, "That's the kind we want in church; the good ones can stay home. A church is a congregation of sinners, not an assembly of saints." In 1970, he instituted an annual marathon religious concert—All Nite Soul—that included twelve hours of big jazz bands, more intimate jazz ensembles, jazz soloists, and gospel choirs.

Throughout the 1960s and beyond, sacred music within the context of jazz was advocated by such jazz greats as Wynton Marsalis, Pat Metheny, John Coltrane, and Dave Brubeck. In addition to the works written by Brubeck in this volume, which are Judaically related, he wrote other works with purely Christian connection and content that were intended as sacred jazz music: The Voice of the Holy Spirit; To Hope! A Celebration; and The Light in the Wilderness, in which the Sermon on the Mount is infused with highly original jazz styles and idioms.

Given the relaxation in attitudes toward convention that symbolized the 1960s, it was only a matter of time before certain liberal American synagogues—some of which had already shown themselves open to experimentation with modes of worship not tied to European musical tradition—would open their doors to jazz and blues, and then to the more contemporary popular expression of younger generations. With jazz and blues in particular, some asked why it had taken so long. A number of composers responded to the challenge; others, who had long harbored an abiding interest in jazz and blues, were inspired independently to create such liturgical settings out of a readiness to confront and assimilate, with artistic integrity, these major forces in American music.

There is, of course, no jazz or blues basis in the continuum of synagogue music tradition in terms of style, rhythm, or harmony. But the two realms have in common a deep sense of spirituality, of soulful reflection, of glorious praise, of open-endedness, and of yearning. Moreover, there is one concrete feature shared in principle by jazz and the most traditional guises of cantorial art: improvisation. By its very nature, hazzanut—most especially its eastern European form (which includes its transplantation in America)—is an improvisatory genre. Nearly all the great virtuoso cantors of eastern Europe in the golden age of that liturgical expression—there or wherever such cantors emigrated—were also improvisatory composers. Apart from formal compositions (which they often created as well) with predetermined choral parts or sections, few cantors in that age sang the compositions of others. And even written compositions allow for interpolated solo improvisation, which a skilled traditional synagogue choirmaster must be able to follow in providing improvised choral support. Traditional synagogue choristers, too, have always been expected to improvise collectively for responses, cadences, and underpinnings of pedal points or tones—including, ideally, cantorially improvised modulations and implied chord progressions. Although the art of cantorial improvisation has diminished significantly in recent years (Cantor Max Wohlberg used to tell his students that in modern American synagogue contexts, the safest improvisation is one composed in advance!), there are still traditional virtuoso cantors capable of serious, even intricate improvisation on the pulpit. In this respect, their art suggests a parallel to that of jazz. And perhaps it is partly this parallel that caught the attention of some of the composers who addressed the idea of a jazz synagogue service, even if in such services improvisation has been more the province of the instrumentalists than of the cantor or cantorial soloist.

Another feature common in principle to jazz and hazzanut concerns what is known in the former's terminology as "call and response." One instrumental section—clarinets, for example—might play a motive or short phrase, which is then automatically repeated ("answered"), perhaps with some variation, in the trombones. In a second type of this call-and-response procedure, a soloist plays a full phrase that is promptly echoed by an instrumental section or by the entire ensemble. In traditional cantorial improvisation (as well as its reduction to notation in formally composed pieces) the choir is often expected to respond in similar fashion to a phrase sung by the cantor—especially at cadences. Historically, this was one of the principal functions of cantorial choirs, dating to the Middle Ages.

Included in this volume are some of the most important and groundbreaking synagogue pieces and other sacred Judaically related works in jazz, blues, and folk-rock styles and idioms.

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