

## **Salamone Rossi, Jewish Musician of the Renaissance**

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Salamone Rossi, *ebreo* (Jew)—as all Jews were then designated—was probably born in 1570, lived and worked in the city of Mantua, in what is now northern Italy, and died sometime after 1628 (the last date for which we have any record of him).

Mantua—the city to which Romeo fled when he was exiled for killing Juliet’s cousin in Verona, the city in which the story of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* takes place—is about 28 miles south Verona, 100 miles southwest of Venice. Mantua was governed by dukes of the Gonzaga family, and while Rossi received some payments from the ducal court, he was also employed by the Jewish theatrical troupe of the city and had income from various business arrangements.

During the years 1589 to 1628 Salamone Rossi published 8 collections of Italian secular vocal music for 3 to 5 voices (meaning separate, independent parts), 4 collections of instrumental music, and 1 collection of Hebrew compositions for 3 to 8 voices.

To put those years in context, when Rossi was born Shakespeare was 6 years old; *Romeo and Juliet* was first performed in 1594/95 and *The Merchant of Venice* in 1596/97. The early 17th century saw the first performances of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*; the first English settlements in the New World; and the development of a new music genre, the opera (one of the earliest of these, Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, was written for Mantua in 1607).

In 1600 there was no such thing as Italy, of course. The southern part of the peninsula, as well as Sicily and Sardinia, belonged to Spain. A broad swath across the middle, spreading up northeast from Rome, was the Papal States. The north consisted of several independent entities such as the duchies of Mantua, Parma, and Tuscany, the Bishopric of Trent, and the Republics of Lucca and Venice, and of territories of the Austrian Hapsburg or Holy Roman Empire. The struggle to unify the country took place through much of the 19th century, culminating in 1871. I will use the name Italy tonight.

A little slice of history: In 1492, when the Jews who refused to convert to Christianity were expelled from Spain and its territories, tens of thousands of Jews living in Spanish “Italy” left for other cities on the peninsula, while others went to the Ottoman Empire, doing business across the Adriatic with ports such as Venice and Ancona.

Soon Italian cities imposed restrictions regarding where their Jews could live, what work they could do, and what they could wear. The first Jewish ghetto was established in Venice in 1516. Others followed, those of Rome and Florence, for instance, in 1555 and 1571. Mantua’s ghetto was not formed until 1612. In 1630 Mantua was sacked and plundered by Ferdinand II’s imperial troops, the Jews expelled, and the ghetto destroyed. Rossi may have died in the plague that followed, or he may, with many other Mantuan Jews, have gone to the Venetian ghetto, where he had friends and supporters.

In the early 17th century, there were some 23 hundred Jews living in Mantua—perhaps as much as 8% of the population. Among them were bankers, physicians, musicians, merchants, butchers, and rabbis. In 1630 there were nine synagogues (some in well-to-do private homes) and 24 rabbis in the ghetto. Most of the synagogues belonged to the *Italiani* Jews who followed the Roman rite; a few were Ashkenazic; none were Sephardic.

Salamone Rossi’s relationship with Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga I stood him in good stead. In 1606 the Duke gave him the privilege of not having to wear the compulsory yellow badge, two strips of cloth “half an arm long and a finger wide, [...one] to be set on the frock or coat, two fingers away from its buttons, the other on the hat or head garment [...] to be visible even from a distance.”<sup>1</sup> In 1619 Rossi was exempted from the sumptuary laws that restricted what type of clothing Jews were permitted to wear. Other privileges given—or more accurately *sold*—to Jews included the privilege to carry a weapon, to study medicine at the university, and to live outside the ghetto. Such privileges were given to actors, musicians, physicians, middlemen, and loan bankers—all occupations that served the Christians’ needs and brought the Jews into contact

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<sup>1</sup> Don Harrán, *Salamone Rossi: Jewish Musician in Late Renaissance Mantua* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 25.

with Christians. However, after the death of Duke Vincenzo, Rossi's connection with the court became less close, as the musical life at court declined along with the economic circumstances of the duchy. (From 1600 to 1620 about 30 musicians were on the court payroll; by 1628 there were hardly any.)

Jewish acting troupes played a significant role in Mantuan theatrical life. During the Carnival season preceding Lent, plays and processions for public entertainment were held outdoors, and from 1588 onward during Carnival the Jewish community honored the Duke's visit to a synagogue with a play. Between the acts there would be scenes of music and spectacle (called *intermedii*) and refreshments. The Jews, of course, had to pay for these productions. A payroll from 1605 lists Salamone and his brother Emanuele as participants. Rossi is said to have composed music for the Jewish troupe's *intermedii*, but none has survived.

Koleinu tonight is singing works from Rossi's 1622 collection of settings of Hebrew texts, *Hashirim asher li-sh'lomo* (literally, *The Songs that are Solomon's*). The title alludes to the composer's name, *Sh'lomo min-ha-Adumim*, "Solomon from the Red Ones," or, in Italian, *Salamone Rossi*, and is a play on the biblical book *Shir hashirim asher li-sh'lomo* (*The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's*). None of the texts, however, comes from that book—20 of the 33 texts are drawn from Psalms, one each from Leviticus and Isaiah, five are verse hymns or *piyyutim*, five are prayers, and one is a wedding ode. The liturgical texts are found in prayer books of the Roman rite from the late 16th century, while some of the other texts are found in books of Kabbalistic confraternities such as the one published in 1612 for the *Shomerim Laboker* (Morning Watchmen).

These compositions are *polyphonic*, combining three or more individual melodies. I should mention here that the *Songs*, like all vocal music of the 17th century, were printed as separate part-books—one for soprano, one for alto, and so on—to facilitate performance. Groups didn't buy multiple copies of a complete score, but rather a smaller book for each performer, comparable to music for band and orchestra today.

There was no precedent for writing polyphonic works with Hebrew texts. Rossi's pieces are essentially in the style of late-Renaissance Italian music (think Palestrina, Monteverdi). They don't sound "Jewish" except for the texts. In his preface to the publication Rossi indicated that he "worked and labored" on the Hebrew compositions for years. They must have been performed privately, for he says that singers and listeners were delighted by them, and that friends urged him to publish them.

Rossi had a couple of hurdles to get over, however.

1) There was (and is) a strong animosity in orthodox Judaism to "art music"—the coined Hebrew word is *musikáh*—as opposed to traditional chant in the synagogue. While there is evidence of attempts to introduce some sort of part singing into Italian synagogues, the rabbinic responsa and discussions do not make clear exactly what sort of music it is. It might simply have been improvised harmony, of the sort we spontaneously do in "Avinu malkenu" in the section "Oseh imanu tzedakah va chesed." It might have been *polyphony* or *counterpoint*, where the different voices don't all sing the same words and rhythm, but this too can be improvised. A simple example is the round or canon we create when we sing "Shalom chaverim" or "Hine ma tov," the voices beginning at different times with the same music. The complex polyphony of the Renaissance is composed, learned, art-full music, and it is in this style that Rossi wrote.

The resistance to *musikáh* was countered by Rabbi Leone Modena in a responsum of 1605. He argued that art music derives from the Temple, which used instruments and voices and which itself inspired Christian music.

2) There was no tradition of how to compose—and print—art music with Hebrew words. Hebrew reads from right to left, while European musical notation—which has evolved from the ninth century onwards and continues to evolve today—reads from left to right. According to Leone Modena, in Rossi's eyes "it seemed better for the readers to pronounce the letters backward and read, in contrary order, the words of the song that are well known to all, than to reverse the direction of the notes from what is customary and have the readers move their eyes, as we Jews are used to write, from right to left, lest they lose their minds."

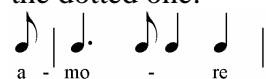
Rossi placed each Hebrew word of the text—written normally, from right to left, and without vowel points, the way it appears in the Torah scroll—under the *last* note of the musical phrase to which the word was to be sung. Thus the entire word was easily grasped at once. However, in many cases, there are *more notes* than there are syllables, and although the first and last notes are obvious, the distribution of the remaining ones is not.

For Latin and Italian texts there were conventional rules about how to do this. For example, the accented syllable—in Italian usually the penultimate—falls on the extra, faster notes.

Or, syllables are not to be sung on the first larger note after smaller ones or on the smaller ones themselves:



Or, in a dotted figure, separate syllables are not to be assigned to the smaller note or notes after the dotted one:



The only problem with these conventions is that in Hebrew, the accent usually falls on the last syllable. In the 33 pieces in Rossi's collection, there are about 22 problematic spots, where the Italian conventions cause the Hebrew text to be mis-accented. The music adapts better to the Italian approach, suggesting that Rossi was not seriously concerned about this issue. Modern editors sometimes disagree.

Where were the *Songs* performed? Possible venues include the synagogue, the study hall (where they would be rehearsed), the house of a bride and groom, and other festivities in private homes. The texts are suitable for holidays, feast days, festivals, Sabbaths, weddings, circumcisions, times of rejoicing, banquets, and so on. They could be performed by talented amateurs (like Koleinu). The Mantuan Jews in 1610 were said not to have many singers for the *intermedii*, but there were certainly professional performers among them. We really don't know how much the *Songs* were ever performed in synagogues. A few references from 1642 imply some might have been done on feast days, but *musikáh* didn't ever catch on in the Italian rite, nor did it become an integral part of Ashkenazi ritual until the 19th century. In fact, copies of Rossi's

publication are rare: only two complete sets of the 8 partbooks are extant, plus 11 additional partbooks, out of which it is impossible to make up another complete set.

But what is intriguing is the revival of interest in Rossi's music in the late 19th and the 20th centuries, correlating with a revival of "early music" in general. There was such desire for Renaissance music suitable for synagogue use that adaptations were made. The *Shir ha-ma'alot* that opened our service is almost note-for-note the music printed in 1622, but the editor has added text repetitions to break up long melodies on a single syllable. The remaining pieces tonight come from an edition by Isadore Freed (1900-1960), a composer and organist who was Professor of Music at Hebrew Union College's School of Sacred Music. Freed wrote:

"Synagogue music must be first good music; it must be living music; it must be functional music, and it should bear witness to the continuity of Jewish tradition, be it in language, expression, form or style."

Following his own precept, he derived from Rossi's music a set of pieces suitable for a Reform Jewish Sabbath Eve service.

The *Bar'echu*, like *Shir ha-ma'alot*, is the piece Rossi published, with some adjustments in the rhythm to change the way the text is accented.

In Rossi's liturgical pieces, the responses belonging to the congregation are not set to music, and he did not set the text of the *Sh'ma*. As far as I can tell, Freed himself composed this setting, using four times a motif that does not seem to come from any of the *Songs*.

For the *Mi chamocha*, Freed adapted a portion of Rossi's setting of Ps. 146, Hallelujah nafshi et Adonai (Hallelujah! O my soul praise the Lord), with some changes in the rhythm to accommodate the different text.

The *Adon olam* has an even more complicated history. Rossi set this hymn for 8 independent voices, one of the most difficult of the works—and not the one sung tonight. In 1876 Samuel Naumburg, in Paris, set the text of *Adon olam* to Rossi's *Kaddish* for 5 voices, which he recomposed for 4 voices. Naumburg was one of a number of musically trained chazzanim and choirmasters—among whom were Solomon Sulzer in Vienna and Louis

Lewandowski in Berlin—who felt the traditional synagogue melodies should be given a “musical face lift” in accordance with the current taste. Naumburg’s arrangement of *Adon olam* was reprinted in Paris in 1933 and again in New York in 1954. I have not been able to compare Freed’s arrangement to Naumburg’s, but they both derive from Rossi’s *Kaddish*.

So we come around again to the premise that music in the synagogue should, as Rossi wrote, be used “for thanking God and singing to His exalted name on all sacred occasions” and that things old and new may be pressed into God’s service. Tonight, we are walking in Rossi’s footsteps.