

Max Helfman: An Offering in Sound

We Jews never plunge into any sacred observance without an introduction. We are very conscious of its importance. We introduce our Sabbath and our festivals with a statement of sanctification: the Kiddish. It is not just a blessing over wine. Its text refers to the creation of the world, to the Exodus from Egypt, and it endorses the choice of Israel as a people to serve God. What a lengthy introduction for the privilege of taking a sip of wine! Many of our precepts and rituals are preceded by “*Hinnení muchan umezuman*,”—here I am ready and prepared. Isn’t our entire life considered to be only an introduction?

Max Helfman¹



Max Helfman² was born in Radzyn, Poland in 1901.³ Part of a musical family, his father, Nathan, “was a teacher, a Hazzan, and a mohel; he had also been a *shochet* and a *shadkhn* when they lived in Europe (he could have founded a *shtetl* in America single-handedly).”⁴ By 1909, he had immigrated to America with his family, and found himself living in the cacophony of the Lower East Side. Musically gifted, he quickly devoted himself to sacred music from a young age: “Even at that time he chanted like a ‘Menagen,’ not like a child. He was also a member of Maram Charry’s choir in Lower Manhattan. Cantor David Putterman recalls that he himself, as the outstanding alto soloist of the Synagogue of New York at that time, had only one competitor—Max Helfman.”⁵ Helfman began his compositional career equally young:

The family story was that Max did not want to become Bar Mitzvah—rebellion had set in—and in as much as father was a Rabbi, it was a scandal! So they worked on him in various ways, unsuccessfully, but finally were able to bribe him by a promised first performance of his “Ahavas Olom.” This was in Port Chester, N.Y. in 1914. Max was fond of this work, and performed it over and over throughout his life.⁶

¹ Modell, P. (1974). In *Max Helfman: A Biographical Sketch* (pp. 15–16). Judah L. Magnes Memorial Museum.

² Image: Noted Musicians Here During Holyday. (1958, September). *Temple Journal*, p. 3.

³ Levin, N. W. (n.d.). *Helfman, Max*. Milken Archive of Jewish Music. Retrieved December 22, 2022, from <http://www.milkenarchive.org/people/view/all/514/Max+Helfman>

⁴ Clissold, G. J. (1998). *A Different Side of Max Helfman: A Study of Helfman's Lesser Known and Unpublished Works* (dissertation). Hebrew Union College, New York, NY.

⁵ Modell, P. (1974) pg. 18.

⁶ Modell, P., & Neumann, R. J. (1983). MAX HELFMAN: THE MAN AND HIS MUSICAL LEGACY. *Musica Judaica*, 6(1), 74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23687892>

While Helfman never received a formal university education, he received additional musical education at Mannes College of Music in New York. In 1926, he married Florence Snowe,⁷ with whom they had two children: Naomi⁸ and David.⁹

He succeeded Zavel Zilberts as organist—an instrument he did not play at the time—at Temple Israel in Manhattan, where he began a long and fruitful partnership with Cantor David Putterman. In 1929, he undertook a three-year fellowship at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, while simultaneously serving as Choir Director at Temple Emanuel in Paterson, New Jersey. From there, Helfman’s career began a meteoric rise. His work as a choir director led to appointments with the *Arbeter Ring* and the Workmen’s Circle Chorus before being appointed the head of the leftist choral organization, the *Freshet Gezang Farein*. As head of the Jewish Workers Musical Alliance, he commanded titanic choral forces in performance. After a brief stint at Ansche Chesed Synagogue in New York, he became the Music Director at B’nai Abraham in Newark, New Jersey, his longest-tenured position.¹⁰

A well-liked, erudite man, Helfman was a voracious reader.¹¹ He never learned to drive a car, preferring public transportation for the additional time it gave him to read and write.

Joachim Prinz, remembering the spontaneous creativity of Helfman, remarked to his Assistant Rabbi, now Senior Rabbi at Temple B’nai Abraham in West Orange, New Jersey: “One Friday I wanted a new *L’cha Dodi*, so I called Max up and that night he came with a score. The choir sang it and it was extraordinary.” Joachim then remarked to Rabbi Friedman, “Can you believe he wrote that on the subway?” to which Rabbi Friedman replied, “It sounded like Max wrote on the subway.”¹²

Loath to meet a deadline, yet generous in his time, Helfman reflected on his own tendencies thus: “I have my feet firmly planted in the clouds.”¹³

⁷ Florence Shnayerson Helfman, 1906-1997: a devoted spouse, accomplished pianist, and talented amateur artist, who spent her life in care of her husband’s legacy.

⁸ Naomi Graffman, 1929-2019: a painter, writer, and wife of Gary Graffman, former director and president of the Curtis School of Music, renowned for her tireless work in aid of the school.

⁹ David Helfman, 1942-1993: Other than an aptitude for music from a young age and a sadly early death, there is little information to be gleaned of his life, though he was fondly remembered as a childhood friend by a current member of Washington Hebrew Congregation.

¹⁰ For a concise timeline of Helfman’s life, please consult:

Lopatin, A. M. (2014). *The Magnificent Max Helfman: An Influential Cornerstone of 20th Century American Jewish Music* (dissertation).

¹¹ As his brother, Dr. Hyman Helfman, relates: “Max visited me frequently. There was one place where I could always be sure to find him—my library. Having read almost every volume, Max came across the Hadassah Cook Book. The following morning he walked breezily to the breakfast table and asked, ‘Well, what do you want me to cook for you today?’”

Moddel, P. (1974) pg. 19.

¹² Clissold, G. J. pg. 6-7.

¹³ Moddel, P. (1974) pg. 22.

Despite that, Helfman approached music with ambition and vigor. He expected the best of his musicians, and refused to perform on any but the largest of stages: Carnegie Hall was a particular favorite.¹⁴ He found an equally vast stage amidst the enormity of nature at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in California, his spiritual home for the latter portion of his life. In 1951, Helfman left his New York life behind, resettling on the West Coast, and threw himself into music designed to enhance the educational and spiritual experience of the camp. Utterly inspired—“Can you imagine what music, ballet, literature, and pageantry will come out of this kind of working together?”¹⁵—Helfman crafted an entire liturgy specifically for this new, burgeoning community.¹⁶

Helfman centered his life on music, and explored its many facets through a multiplicity of ways: as composer, conductor, educator, and mentor. As a composer, he worked to honor the legacy and heritage of Jewish music while striving to create a modern sound. He felt, “Originality is the most important quality of a composer. It is not achieved by breaking with the past, but by building on it and using it as a foundation.”¹⁷ A consummate arranger, Helfman devoted himself to the publication of sterling settings of Israeli song, and created elaborate choral versions of popular Yiddish songs for his choruses. Within his original compositions, he found ways to express originality even while holding to tradition: “Helfman would use the Magein Avot mode while composing for the Maariv Shabbat service and he would also use the Adonai Malach mode when composing for Kabbalat Shabbat. Both of these are the traditional Jewish modes for those parts of the service.”¹⁸ As he said himself:

Most of our prayers have their musical as well as liturgic tradition: their own mode, melodic idiom, form and character. Naturally, these traditions vary substantially in their historic importance and in their artistic value. But—ancient or comparatively recent, lofty or commonplace, subtle or naive—they all form part of the gradually evolving music-language of our prayers; they constitute the recognizable sound-mosaic of our divine worship and cannot be lightly ignored by those who write for the living synagogue.¹⁹

He carried this diligence into his work as an educator. Helfman served on the faculty of the School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College in New York, and as the founding director of the Department of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, as well as the Dean

¹⁴ “His vocal music and its pitch demand the attention of the singers. If a choral group feels comfortable and complacent, it usually sounds dead. To overcome this tendency, Max raised the register, so that the singers felt slightly uncomfortable, and this made the difference between complacency and excitement.”

Moddel, P. (1974) pg. 75.

¹⁵ Moddel, P. (1974) pg. 38.

¹⁶ “He also wrote and adapted synagogue melodies, and made them appear in a new dress as *The Brandeis Sabbath Services*, the *Birkat Amazon*, the *Havdalah Service*, and compositions for special occasions such, as the *Patriarch’s Lament*, a cantata Tisha B’av.”

Moddel, P. (1974) pg. 37-8.

¹⁷ Levin, N.W.

¹⁸ Lopatin, A. M. pg. 22.

¹⁹ Helfman, M. (1950). In *The Holy Ark: Aron Ha-Kodesh*. Preface, Transcontinental Music Corp.

of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Judaism. His work in the classroom inspired an entire generation of students, as remembered by Charles Davidson:

He had the unique ability to fire and to inspire any who heard him speak or watched him teach or direct. Through these songs we can understand his ability to touch lives and to sow seeds of love for things Jewish and for Jewish Music in countless numbers of hearts. Max Helfman lived and breathed the Jewish melos all of his life and showed the living quintessence of the Jewish Heart and the Jewish Soul by the example of his own life.²⁰

Helfman, like many polymaths, must have felt torn—he threw himself into every opportunity, with the attendant result of insufficient time to utterly devote himself to any one field. He often had to be pressed to complete a work, and “was in the habit of lending original compositions to his friends without retaining a copy.”²¹ While his published works are myriad, many of his pieces were prepared posthumously, through the efforts of his wife and his students.²² He composed voluminously for his many congregations, leaving behind a wealth of undiscovered manuscripts. His major liturgical compositions, *Shabbat Kodesh* and *Aron Ha-Kodesh*, have since been bolstered by *Shabbat Menucha* and *Music for a Mourner's Service*, two posthumous compilations.

Yet so much more music exists to uncover—Helfman wrote extensive music for the liturgy of the High Holidays, especially for Washington Hebrew Congregation. Helfman was hired to:

direct the music for the High Holiday services at the Washington Hebrew Congregation, in Washington, D.C. [...] The presentation of the liturgy was planned on a large scale. In addition to a first class choir and organist, Helfman also had an orchestra at his disposal. The result was a superlative musical offering. Rabbi Gerstenfeld, the spiritual leader of the Temple, exclaimed with pride, “There is no other service like this on the face of the earth!”²³

From the archives of their congregation comes additional information. In 1959, the Washington Post published an article which includes the phrase “Several original works composed by Helfman will be sung by the 12-voice choir and two soloists during the Jewish High Holy Days which begin tonight.”²⁴ In 1961, the Congregation wrote, “To create an artistic unity, yet with sufficient elements of contrast, our music for the High Holydays has therefore been confined to

²⁰ Helfman, M., & Davidson, C. (1965). In *Music for a Mourner's Service*. Preface, Mills Music.

²¹ Modell, P. (1974) pg. 53.

²² As has been noted, “if disorganization is the sign of genius, Max certainly excelled, for his works were scattered throughout the breadth of the United States. He had never compiled a list of his compositions, never dated any manuscript, and, to aggravate matters, often omitted to sign his name.”

ibid. pg. 53

²³ Modell, P. (1974) pg. 73-4

²⁴ The Washington Post, Times Herald, October 2, 1959.

the works of only three contemporary composers: Abraham Wolf Binder, Max Helfman and [...] Eric Werner.”²⁵

Max Helfman died suddenly in 1963, at his nephew’s wedding. He left behind a wealth of music and a rich legacy of dedication to the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of Jewish music. As he noted:

Jewish liturgy employs a large variety of scales and modes—Dorian, Phrygian, Mixolydian, diatonic and chromatic, even four, five, nine or ten tone scales [...] Jewish music is pulsating, never dull. Even sung ‘piano’ it has strength. Look at its rhythm, its irregular measure; you force it into bars.²⁶

Helfman spent his life wrestling tradition, balancing the spontaneity of creation with the rigors of responsibility. In his wake, his students offered tribute:

He would try to reach out for something fresh and different.

Cantor William Sharlin

He did not have to dress up a piece nor did he need to gush. Helfman was able to provide the central emotion within his piece.

Cantor Ray Smolover

Max was a dedicated and devoted Jew. His writing was his own expression of his interpretation of the text. He was a true interpreter of the text. He was a remarkable personality.

Cantor Jerry Grodin²⁷

Since his death, his music has entered the canon, becoming an inextricable core of the Jewish music experience.²⁸ Yet despite his respected position and his continued popularity, knowledge of his corpus is primarily limited to a few specific musical moments. While a tremendous deal of work remains in order to reassemble his body of work, even a cursory exploration of available materials reveals a musician of enormous depth of feeling. As he said, “My music is an offering in sound. You may argue with a sermon, but you can never fight a melody.”²⁹

²⁵ Washington Hebrew Congregation, Rosh Hashonah Bulletin, 1961.

²⁶ Modell, P. (1974) pg. 65.

²⁷ Berkson, S. (1989). Max Helfman, A Study of His Music (dissertation).

²⁸ His *Sh'ma Koleinu*, in particular, has achieved monumental status amongst individual pieces.

²⁹ Modell, P. (1974) pg. 62.

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