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Augmented Understanding: Srul Irving Glick and the Redefinition of the Concept of Jewish Composers

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Abstract

North American Jewish musicians and composers in the early twentieth century fought many of the same difficulties as their predecessors in Europe. The pressure to assimilate affected them in such a way that many sought to distance themselves from overly Jewish subjects. However, as the century progressed, musicians and composers began investigating these issues and challenging previously accepted assumptions. One such musician was the Canadian composer Srul Irving Glick.

Through years of introspection and self-analysis, Glick discovered that his roots in Judaism were stronger and more important to his identity than were the opinions of others. Thus, with a stronger sense of self, Glick began incorporating Jewish folk idioms and elements of cantorial music into his compositions. This article investigates Glick's journey to acceptance. From concealment to glorification, this article will show that it is Glick's music that truly reflects the heart and soul of this incredible Canadian composer.

The world of Western art music has long been an exclusive club ruled by the elite men of the European music tradition. Not only did these musicians see themselves as artistically superior, but they were also reluctant to face the increased competition that would result from the introduction of outsiders into their ranks. Within this restrictive system, it was very difficult for individuals of non-Christian, European descent to gain recognition as performers or composers. The legacy of this mentality, especially with regards to Jewish musicians, has been felt through the twentieth century. Historically, Jewish

musicians have often distanced themselves from the rest of the Jewish community in order to disguise their descent. Recently, however, this trend has begun to change and Jews have started maintaining their identity while working successfully in the circles of Western art music. One such musician was the twentieth-century Jewish composer Srul Irving Glick. Through an analysis of literary sources, this article will attempt to illustrate the ways in which Glick was able to harmonize his identity as a Jew with his profession as a composer in Canada.

Prior to the eighteenth century, daily life for the Jews of Europe was often difficult. Frequently forced to live in ghettos or *shtetls* (small, Jewish villages), they were severely limited in their choice of profession through restrictive laws and the anti-Jewish sentiment of the largely Christian populace.¹ As rulers changed and economic stability shifted within Europe, anti-Jewish feelings and rhetoric would also change. Occasionally reaching a boiling point, public sentiment could quickly bring about violent uprisings against local Jewish communities.² Yet, as the effects of the Emancipation began to spread throughout Europe, the integration and assimilation of Jews into Western society also spread. To European Jews of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, entrance into high European musical culture was seen as both

1 Stanley Sadie, ed., "Jewish Music," *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. 13 (New York: Macmillan, 2001), 92.

2 For a summary of the history of European Jewry, see Lloyd Gartner's *History of the Jews in Modern Times*. While it focuses largely on the eighteenth century forward, the text also provides an overview of earlier Jewish history in Europe.

a means of professional success and a sign of acceptance within Western culture.³ As a result, the nineteenth century saw a great influx of Jewish men into the realm of professional musicians, composers, and musicologists.⁴ Wealthy Jewish families appreciated the universality of music, and often presided over musical soirées and salons. Moreover, musical education was greatly encouraged in all levels of Jewish society, as the European music world was believed to hold “the greatest prospects for successful acculturation and integration into European society.”⁵

However, the infiltration of Jews into the European music scene was not accepted in all quarters. While nationalism was developing as the newest trend in composition,⁶ Jewish musicians focused on the idea of the concept of music as the one universal language. This concept was appealing to a still largely marginalized group as it represented the dream of building a society in which a man’s character defined him more than did outward differences such as race and religion.⁷ Consequently, their compositions possessed an international quality that led to the idea that Jews were incapable of being truly creative artists. Many believed that the rootlessness of the Jewish people resulted in a lack of cultural authenticity and creativity.⁸ In other words, since the Jews lacked

a nation of their own, some considered them to be without a unique cultural identity of their own. Most attempts by Jews to compose in the style of the nation in which they lived were seen as poor copies of the genuine article, created by unwelcome guests.

This judgment was further reinforced by the separation of the Jewish musicians from their own cultural community. The desire to be accepted as full members of society often resulted in composers’ and musicians’ expressions of alienation from Judaism as a religion and created tension both within the Jewish community and between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities.⁹ In an attempt to reduce the effects of anti-Semitism on their careers, many Jewish musicians distanced themselves from anything that appeared Jewish. Some converted to Christianity to gain acceptance, while others avoided references to their Jewish origins in their compositions—either because they felt they were of no consequence or because they believed their origins were something to be concealed.¹⁰ As a result, there was often little in the works created and performed by these musicians that denoted anything specifically Jewish. The most famous settings of Jewish liturgical and folksong motifs in this period were completed by non-Jewish composers who had possessed no concerns regarding

3 Within the context of this paper, I will only be discussing issues surrounding the Jewish presence in the world of Western art music. There was a great number of musicians and composers involved with Jewish liturgical and secular music; however, it is the interactions between the Jewish and non-Jewish musicians in Western art music that is of interest to this text.

4 Ezra Mendelsohn, “On the Jewish Presence in Nineteenth-Century European Musical Life.” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 9 (1993): 4.

5 Mendelsohn, 6.

6 Nationalism, while first emerging in the eighteenth century, developed extensively in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As recording technology developed, ethnic music also became important to this trend. Donald Grout and Claude Palisca, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 644, 680.

7 Mendelsohn, 11.

8 *Ibid.*, 6–8. One illustration of these beliefs is Wagner’s anti-Semitic essay *Das Judentum in der Musik* (“Judaism in Music”). David Schiller, *Bloch, Schoenberg, and Bernstein: Assimilating Jewish Music* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 2003), 168.

9 Many Orthodox Jews viewed assimilated Jews as opportunists and/or traitors. Grout and Palisca, 93.

10 Mendelsohn, 8. Composers such as Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) and Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), while successful composers of European music for European audiences, were confronted with the complications of assimilation (Schiller, 3). While Meyerbeer maintained his Jewish identity, none of his major stage works were based on Jewish motifs. Conversely, though aware of his Jewish heritage through his grandparents, Mendelssohn lived as a practicing Lutheran (Grout and Palisca, 94). A. Z. Idelsohn, an early scholar of Jewish music, determined that “composers of Jewish origin have in their creations nothing of the Jewish spirit; they are renegades or assimilants, and detest all Jewish cultural values.” This determination included composers such as Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer. A. Z. Idelsohn “My Life (A Sketch),” *Jewish Music Journal* 2 (2) (May–June, 1935): 10.

implications of the material.¹¹

Despite the passage of time, the early twentieth century saw the continuation of these trends with concerns to Jewish musicians and composers. The pressures of assimilation continued to affect Jewish musicians and composers in such a way that many again sought to distance themselves from overly Jewish subjects.¹² However, as the century progressed, musicians and composers began investigating these issues and challenging previously accepted assumptions. One such musician was the Canadian composer Srul Irving Glick.

Born on September 8, 1934, Srul Irving Glick grew up in the diverse atmosphere of the Toronto Jewish community. His earliest introduction to music was through his family. While his older brother Norman,¹³ a professional clarinetist, brought the world of Western classical music into the Glick home, Srul was also introduced to the world of Jewish liturgical music through his father's work as a cantor.

Early in his career, Glick had to deal with many of the same concerns as his predecessors in Europe. As he noted in an interview, "Whether we like it or not, there is still tremendous enmity towards Jews in the

world."¹⁴ Initially, his response as a composer reflected previous patterns. He maintained a firm belief in music as an international, non-denominational language. His father's work as a cantor initially "affected [him] ... because it turned [him] away from Judaism."¹⁵ He "wanted to be a universalist" in his compositions.¹⁶ With these ideas firmly in mind, Glick completed his bachelor's and master's in music at the University of Toronto.¹⁷ It was not until he had worked both at home and abroad, studying in Paris with such composers as Louis Saguer, Darius Milhaud, and Max Deutch,¹⁸ that he appears to have begun revising these opinions. Through years of study, Glick began to discover that "I can only be me."¹⁹ He learned a great deal through his work with other composers; however, most importantly he learned to identify those things that cannot be learned. When Glick asked Max Deutch to teach him about twelve-tone composition, Deutch replied, "You don't learn twelve-tone technique; when you're ready for it, you write it and if you're not ready for it, you won't write it."²⁰ Essentially, Glick was learning that there are some things that can only be derived from the self. No amount of training or practice can create intellect, as Glick would later put it.²¹

Over time, Glick began considering the deeper philosophy of both his existence as a composer and his personal identity as a Jew. He questioned, as did so many composers of the twentieth century, what it

11 For example, the most famous setting of the *Kol Nidre* (a liturgical piece performed during the synagogue services on the eve of *Yom Kippur*) was composed by Max Bruch, while many non-Jewish composers, such as Modest Mussorgsky, worked with Jewish folk motives (Mendelsohn, 7). *Nota bene*, for a definition of *Yom Kippur*, see footnote 34.

12 The early works of Schoenberg (1874–1951) were largely uninvolved with Jewish topics. In March of 1898, Schoenberg removed himself from Vienna's Jewish community registry and was baptized as a Protestant (Schiller, 168). It is not until later in his life, after experiencing anti-Semitism first-hand in 1923, that his music began to reflect his newly found interest in Zionism and other Jewish matters. Aaron Copland worked mainly within the nationalistic trend, working to compose American music without Jewish content. William Benjamin, *Jews and the Revolution in Music: Liberation and Loss*, Lecture Series (February 11 and 18, 2004). Irving Berlin is often seen as the quintessential American-Jewish songwriter. He was an immigrant "... who quickly acclimated, he became as all-American as his song 'God Bless America.'" Kenneth Kanter, *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Ktav, 1982), 196.

13 Born in Toronto on January 1, 1928.

14 "A Composer's Contribution: Being Able To Say Something 'Particular.'" *Canadian Composer* 103 (September 1975): 4.

15 "A Composer's Contribution," 4.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Earned in 1955 and 1958, respectively. K. MacMillan and J. Beckwith, eds., "Srul Irving Glick," in *Contemporary Canadian Composers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 87.

18 "Srul Irving Glick—Biography," www.srulirvingglick.com, accessed January 8, 2004.

19 "A Composer's Contribution," 6.

20 *Ibid.*, 8.

21 In an interview Glick stated that "there are two parts to music: There's a man who *has* ideas, and there's a man who can *express* ideas. They are not always in the same person and it's tragic when that happens ... I think it takes intellect to write from your heart. This is the point: You have to have a *way* to do it, to get it out." *Ibid.*, 6.

meant to attempt to compose music in a world so filled with poverty, fear, and violence. He also investigated the abstract nature of music as an art form. While some composers chose to stop writing music in light of these disturbing reflections, Glick determined that “music should be an expression of your indication that life is an affirmative force” going beyond the darkness of everyday life.²² Through endlessly testing new materials and motives, he could decide whether or not the ideas held truth for him. Glick noted in an interview that he didn’t want to write music that did not possess beauty, but that he used harshness as a contrast that could evolve into other things.²³

These investigations also led Glick to resolve many issues surrounding his identity as a Jew. He ultimately concluded that his “roots, as a Jew, were deeper than [his] desire to be a composer in the universal sense.”²⁴

I looked at Judaism very carefully, and not prejudicially, and I found that *I don’t have to be inferior*; it is one of the most glorious cultural and philosophical and creative traditions the world has ever known. So I had to work through that personal fear in myself.²⁵

By accepting his cultural roots, Glick was able to begin incorporating the two branches of his identity into his work: his identity as a Canadian composer and as a Jewish composer.²⁶ The cantorial tradition his father introduced him to as a child began to reassert itself, as did the Jewish folk idioms he learned as a child with Habonim.²⁷ These musical dialects had imbedded themselves in the recesses of his mind sufficiently so that he was able to incorporate them in his work. Cantorial music is especially complex; it is a music for which there are no easy phrases. Instead, “it spins out in a long line, turning back in on itself

and going forth again, forming a dramatic line with emotional content.”²⁸

Over time, Glick began working these varied threads together into the tapestries of his compositions. In some cases, he attempted to develop a synthesis of the rhythmic drive of jazz and the symmetry of dance music with the lyrical quality of Hebraic music.²⁹ At other times, he layers textural and chordal thickness with Jewish folk lyricism and tonality, often in a contrapuntal fashion.³⁰ As noted in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, while his work of the 1970s experimented with more contemporary idioms, his later works “achieved a synthesis of Jewish and classical musical traditions, creating from these two strains a personal idiom that is openly lyrical and direct in its emotional appeal.”³¹

Srul Irving Glick further demonstrated his acceptance of and connection to his cultural background through his liturgical work. In 1969, he began working at Toronto’s Beth Tikvah synagogue as choir director. While working with the synagogue, he composed many liturgical pieces and arranged Yiddish folksongs for his choir.³² His extensive work and dedication to the *shul* (synagogue) was recognized in 1978 when he was made composer-in-residence of Beth Tikvah. By 2001, Glick had written almost two hundred pieces of liturgical music and had received several awards for his contributions to Jewish music.³³ He considered his work with the *shul*

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 4.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

27 Habonim is a Labor Zionist youth group. “Srul Irving Glick: A Canadian Who Came Home.” *Canadian Composer* 23 (November 1967): 38.

28 Robin Elliott, “A New Future for Glick.” *Canadian Composer* 210 (May 1986): 18.

29 “Srul Irving Glick: A Canadian Who Came Home,”

38. Completed in 1967, Glick’s only ballet, *Heritage Dance Symphony*, incorporated these idioms. Clifford Ford and Robin Elliott, “Srul Irving Glick” *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 532.

30 MacMillan and Beckwith, 87.

31 Ford and Elliott, 532.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Grout and Palisca, 945. Among other honours, Glick was presented the J. I. Segal Award for contributions to Jewish music, the Kavod Award from the Cantor’s Assembly of America, and the Solomon Schechter Award from the United Synagogue of America. He was also presented an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal Canadian College of Organists (“Srul Irving Glick—Biography,” www.srulirvingglick.com). In 1993,

to be a labour of love full of beauty and inspiration. He once noted that in his early years at Beth Tikvah he “was so shocked after [they’d] finished Yom Kippur³⁴ services that [they] hadn’t brought Mashiach³⁵ because of the intensity and beauty of the singing.”³⁶ Glick had resolved the psychological conflict over his cultural heritage and, unlike his predecessors, he did not believe it was necessary to deny his roots in order to maintain his success within Western art music.

Tragically, Srul Irving Glick died of cancer in 2002.³⁷ His contributions to the Canadian musical landscape are immeasurable and live on in performances of his extensive library of creations. However, of more import than his prodigious melodic legacy is his redefinition of the identity of the Jewish composer. Not willing to accept the European stereotype of Jewish musicians as uninspired, Glick investigated his own preconceived notions and found them lacking. By truly accepting his identity as a Jew, he was able to introduce complex, new layers to the harmonic and melodic texture of his compositions. Moreover, through his work with the Beth Tikvah, he was able to find great joy in merging his musical talent with his spiritual endeavours. Srul Irving Glick gained what so many of his earlier colleagues were unable to obtain—the confidence inspired by a strong Jewish identity within a supportive community combined with the security of professional success in a career he adored.

Glick was presented the Governor General’s Medal for contribution to Canadian culture, and in 1994 was appointed a member of the Order of Canada. “Srul Irving Glick: A Renowned Composer Remembered,” *Words and Music* 9 (2) (Summer 2002): 9.

34 *Yom Kippur*, or the Day of Atonement, occurs on the ninth and tenth days of the month of *Tishri* in the Jewish calendar. It is a time for the confession of sins, repentance, and reconciliation with both God and other humans. David Noss, *A History of the World’s Religions* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), 445.

35 *Mashiach* is the transliteration of the Hebrew word for Messiah.

36 Frances Kraft, “Srul Irving Glick to be Honored,” *Canadian Jewish News* 30 (2) (January 13, 2000): 18.

37 “Composer/Conductor Srul Irving Glick Dies of Cancer in Toronto,” *Canadian Press Newswire* 18 (April 2002), <http://delos.lib.sfu.ca>.

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