

The Psalm-Settings of Benedetto Marcello
(Commentary offered at the Jubal's Lyre Hanukkah concert December 11, 1993)

The tune for Psalm 96 that you just heard is at least 270 years old. It was in use in the Sephardic synagogue of the Venetian Ghetto in the 1720's.

How do we know this? We know this because of a Venetian composer named Benedetto Marcello, who was born into a patrician family in Venice in 1686. In the 1720's Marcello published original musical settings -- in cantata form-- of the first 50 psalms of the Bible. The text of these psalm-cantatas was not Latin -- it was Venetian Italian. These were not for Church use, but for private use. The musical idiom that they employ sounds not ecclesiastical, but somewhat like early Italian opera. Rossini and Verdi looked back on Marcello, the composer of these psalm-cantatas, as their great predecessor: in their time, he was regarded as second only to Palestrina in the pantheon of Italian composers. Marcello's Psalms swept Europe in the 1720's. They were published in German, French, Swedish, Russian and English. And their popularity lasted well into the 19th century. Now, however, they are mostly forgotten and rarely performed.

But what has all this to do with the Sephardic Ghetto tune that we heard a couple of minutes ago...? One of the features of Marcello's Psalms that aroused the interest and appreciation of the musical public was their use of Hebrew melodies. Eleven chant-tunes from the Venetian Ghetto are incorporated into the first twenty-two of Marcello's Psalms. They were taken both from the Sephardic synagogue which the Venetians called *spagnuolo* (that is, Spanish) and the Ashkenazic synagogue, which they called *tedesco* (that is, German). These chant-tunes, or *intonazioni*, as Marcello called them, are not only psalm-tunes. They also include a *Kaddish*, a *Lekha Dodi* (a song to welcome the Sabbath) and a *Hamavdil bein kodesh lehol* (bidding farewell to the Sabbath).

The Hebrew melodies that we find in Marcello's Psalms are interesting for us in two ways: First, they provide evidence for our understanding of the relation of the Venetian Ghetto to the larger gentile world around it. If you look at the first page in your program booklet [*see below*], you will see that Marcello published actual Hebrew letters, beautifully printed, for the opening words of the tunes he was borrowing, with musical notes, written from right to left to accommodate the Hebrew language, and with the name of the Deity represented by a *heh* for Hashem, according to traditional Jewish practice.

Clearly Marcello did not just pick up these tunes from a peddler in the street or from listening outside a synagogue window (impossible anyway since the Ghetto sanctuaries are on higher floors). Clearly he had some sort of respectful relations with learned people from the Ghetto. Sometimes, in reading about the relations to the Ghetto of Venetian gentiles in the 17th & 18th centuries, I am reminded of the relation of downtown New York to Harlem in the 1920's, during what has been called the Harlem Renaissance. Like Harlem, the Ghetto was out of bounds, but there were fascinating things happening there that seemed more real and elemental than the "downtown" world, people downtown wanted to know about. Marcello seems to have wanted to incorporate the Hebrew *intonazioni* in his work because they lent it authenticity of a sort. He also used some Greek melodies and at least one Gregorian psalm tune, for the same reasons.

Secondly, Marcello's Hebrew *intonazioni* are also of interest for the history of Jewish sacred music. The fact is that there is very little, actual documentation of Jewish sacred music before about 1800. Before so-called "emancipation" and "enlightenment", Jews had not formed the habit of writing their sacred

music down. What Marcello has preserved -- as little as it is -- represents an astoundingly large fraction of the corpus of documented Jewish sacred music from before the 19th century.

A word needs to be said about the form in which Marcello preserved these Hebrew chant-tunes. The notation he used -- respectful and valuable though it may be -- is very bare-bones. One cannot be certain about how these tunes were actually sung from looking at the fragments that Marcello published. It's often extremely unclear, for example, how the words are meant to fit the notes. The rendition of Psalm 96 that we sang for you is, so to speak, an attempt to put concert-performance flesh on the bare bones Marcello has given us. This rendition also leans very heavily on arrangement of the *intonazione* that Marcello himself made.

Marcello used the Sephardic tune for Psalm 96 as a small part of his own setting of Psalm 17. Let's hear now what he did with this tune.

The image shows a page from a musical score. At the top, the title reads "Intonazione degli Ebrei Spagnuoli sopra il Salmo" in italics. Below the title, the Hebrew text "שירו לה שיר חדש ונו" is written. The score consists of two systems of staves. The first system has two staves with Hebrew lyrics "שירו לה שיר חדש שירו" written below. The second system has three staves: a vocal line with the Hebrew lyrics "לה כל הארץ" and the Italian lyrics "Qual conge-losa cu-ra dell'occhio la pupilla dell'occhio la pu-pil-", and two piano accompaniment staves. The piano part includes the instruction "Tutti." and the same Italian lyrics. The notation is a simple line with diamond-shaped notes and stems, characteristic of early printed musical notation.

From the original (1724-1727) edition of *Estro poetico-armonico*, Benedetto Marcello's collection of psalm-cantatas