

## The challenges that Jubal's Lyre faces in doing 'musical midrash'

[Remarks made after 3/94 Passover concert intermission]

Before we begin our musical midrash on Psalm 118, I want to say a few words about the challenges JUBAL'S LYRE faces in presenting concerts that aim to illuminate Biblical texts through music.

The first challenge is the relative obscurity of these texts for modern audiences and performers. Almost all of the music we are singing today was written by and for people who knew these texts cold, for people who had been hearing musical settings of these texts all their lives. In hearing a new setting of one of these texts, they did not need to struggle to figure out what the words meant: they already knew the words and they could listen directly to what the new setting was saying about the words, what was new about the new interpretation.

This kind of experience is not inherently alien to us; it's just that our analogous experiences take place in different contexts. When we hear Ella Fitzgerald doing her version of an Irving Berlin song originally sung by Ethel Merman or Fred Astaire, when we hear John Coltrane deconstructing a Rodgers & Hammerstein song from "The Sound of Music," when we hear a Beatles song played Muzak-style at the supermarket, we know what we are listening to, we know what the words are and what they mean (even when the new version is purely instrumental and does not repeat the words for us), and we focus on how the new presentation is interpreting the material (though in the case of the supermarket version of "I Want to Hold Your Hand," "interpretation" may be too kind a term.)

But very few of us today know psalm-texts by heart. And even if we have some familiarity with them in English or Hebrew, Latin or German translations are quite another matter; they are a formidable obstacle to comprehension.

And obscurity of text is not the only challenge we face in a text-centered concert of sacred music. Just as serious a challenge is a viewpoint that generally prevails among performers as well as listeners in concerts of so-called "classical music:" words and meaning don't matter very much; it is rather the music as pure form, as an object of abstract aesthetic contemplation, that really matters.

This viewpoint does not prevail in concerts of popular music, of folk music, or of rock music. At all of these events, people are susceptible to being moved by what the music is telling them. But at most classical music concerts, as at most exhibitions of abstract art, we may hope somehow, ineffably, to be moved, but we don't usually expect to be told anything.

This is not the time fully to address the question of why this viewpoint has prevailed in recent times, but it can briefly be said that it is tied to the notion of "art for art's sake" – the notion that the value of high art, including so-called "serious" music, is somehow absolute and autonomous. That notion has not always been with us. If we take a really long view, it is a kind of blip -- a 20th century blip, though with roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in the history of Western art over the millennia.

Our presentation of Psalm 118 is an experimental attempt to deliver the text, to cut through some of the obscurity that attends it. Before you hear any of the verses of this psalm in a full musical setting, you will hear each verse chanted, in plain unadorned chant tunes, first in Hebrew and then in English: a small crash course in Psalm 118, like the Talmudic prescription for presenting and teaching Torah – in the original and then in *targum* (in translation, that is).

The hope is that the more complex musical settings will then seem not to be just music but actually to be about the text that you have heard and understood. The chant is to be, so to speak, the *peshat* – the plain unadorned text; the complex musical setting is to be the *drash*, the *midrash*, the interpretation.

It may even turn out that some previously opaque foreign phrases will become somewhat more transparent in such a presentation. Thus, for example, the Latin phrase "dextera Domini", the first phrase that you will hear in its beautiful setting by Lassus. Well, it may turn out that it is not so much of a stretch for us to hear those words as actually meaning what the translation tells us: *dextera* may convey the meaning of "the right hand;" and *domini* will actually make us think "of the LORD."

But enough of my words. Let's hear words that have come down to us through the centuries, words that the Levites used to sing in the Temple in Jerusalem and which--amazingly!--have continued to be sung in synagogues and churches and concert halls from those days to our own: the words of Psalm 118.