Spoken Paper

Singing God’s Song in Somewhat Unchartered Territory: Inclusion and Diversity in the Education of Reform Synagogue Cantors (Chazzanim v’Chazzaniot) in the United States

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In this presentation, I will discuss how the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music, the preeminent school for the training of Reform Jewish Cantors in North America, has adapted its education methodologies and pedagogies to an increasingly diverse student body while simultaneously meeting the changing needs of liberal congregations. A nexus of societal changes, changes in American religious life, modifying musical tastes, and a profoundly changing student population at the seminary has yielded a transformation in both educational goals and pedagogic methodologies.

Brief Historical Background

The role of the cantor extends back thousands of years and solidifies as a liturgical role in the Jewish community by about 600 CE. By the 16th century, the Shulchan Aruch (a compendium of Jewish law) codified the requirements for those men (and only men served as cantors until the 20th century) desiring to serve as cantors. The Shulchan Aruch specified that a cantor should be pure in spirit and without sin, be modest in his behavior, have a pleasant voice, and be the most learned and pious in the congregation. The Shulchan Aruch further specified that the cantor should sing sweetly and beautifully. (Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 53 (4-14))

The cantorate arrives in North America shortly after the establishment of the fledgling American colony’s first synagogue Shearith Israel in 1654. But it would
take almost another 300 years before the establishment of the first official
school for cantors was established. Before the founding of the School of Sacred
Music (1947) cantorial training was primarily an educational tutorial process
between mentor teacher and pupil. (Slobin, 2002)

The Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music was founded in 1947
(Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1953) with a mandate to
preserve the musical and cultural heritage destroyed in the Holocaust. Since
that first class was admitted to the School of Sacred Music, much has changed
in America. The student body, faculty, and curriculum of the School of Sacred
Music (SSM) has undergone great transformation since the School’s inception.

The Current Situation

At the School’s inception, the student population was mostly homogenous:
Caucasian, heterosexual men of Ashkenazic background. It wasn’t until 1976
that the first female cantor was ordained and the School’s acceptance of openly
LGBTQ students occurred much later in the 1980s. The change in the SSM
population reflects societal trends both in the greater American community and
more specifically in the Jewish community and the music presented as part of
normative, Reform Jewish worship has simultaneously reflected these changes.

As the greater Jewish community has changed, so has the composition of the
student population of the School of Sacred Music. These changes can be seen
in three areas:

(1) education before SSM studies

(2) family background

(3) issues of gender and sexual orientation.
Previous education: For many years, a large percentage of the SSM student population was music school graduates, most often having majored or specialized in classical vocal training. In recent years, this has changed. Although many SSM students have musical backgrounds, there are many students who also possess degrees in other fields: theatre, Jewish studies, music education, social sciences.

Religious Background: SSM students mirror the larger Jewish population in that many of the recent students and graduates come from families where only one parent is Jewish or one or both parents are Jews by choice. Also, SSM students in recent years have come from increasingly diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Gender and orientation: The SSM ordained the first woman in 1976. The current SSM population is more than 50% female and women predominate in the field. At one time “out of the closet” members of the LGBTQ community were not accepted into the School of Sacred Music program. Over time this has changed, with LGBTQ students admitted into the SSM program if they meet admissions criteria.

Research Question:

The SSM faculty and cantors themselves acknowledge how cantors are “Jewish musical mediators” who “fashion ritual music that addressed national, cultural, and movement-initiated worship trends” (Cohen, 2009, p. 237). Cantorial education and the cantor in the synagogue comprise a mediation between honoring the past and acknowledging the future. This presentation addresses the following:

1. As the School of Sacred Music population changed, how did the faculty redesign curricula and approaches to meet students' needs?
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2. What were these changes and how were they manifest in congregational worship after ordination?

3. What can other educational institutions learn from the School of Sacred Music and the calculus of societal factors that inspired pedagogic change?