In a letter to Sigmund Freud, Romain Rolland argued that religion originates in a broad “oceanic feeling” of cosmic unity rather than in a narrow wish for fatherly protection. Freud conceded that such an “oceanic feeling” may well be included in religion but maintained his view that the yearning for protection is primordial. Does religious music shed light on the issue? Named in honor of Bach, the Cantata Singers have explored religious music for over half a century. In the early hours of Shabbat (last Friday), following a shared meal of candlelight, bread and wine, the Cantata Singers treated us to a vast range of religious sentiment by means of a beautifully interlinked twofold Jordan Hall program. In the first half, Lazar Weiner and Yehudi Wyner brought us to the innermost lining of the human soul, where Jacob struggles with God’s angel and wins the holiest of names, Israel. The second half took us out of the sanctuary and into the profane bustle of the parvis for a staging of King David’s story as told to the “blacksmiths, washer-women and tanners” evoked in Kadya Molodowsky’s powerful poem. Throughout, David Hoose conducted with crisp, passionate intensity and formidable precision. The chorus produced a beautiful range of sounds, effortlessly negotiating complex shifts in meter and nuanced emotional states.

The concert started with premiere performances of art songs by Lazar Weiner as (magnificently) orchestrated by Hoose. Without burdening Weiner’s score with extraneous coloration, Hoose adroitly brought out every inherent feature of the original piano score and more. The first appropriately, was a benediction (Psalm 1), with Rafael Popper-Keizer’s emotional cello preparing the way for tenor Eric Perry’s firm cry of the heart, “Blessed is the man who delights in God’s law” before ending in a solemn, majestic cadence. Weiner’s second set song Abraham Heschel’s Khoyves, a meditation on how we culpably “spend” time. The score conveyed the content in a strikingly direct manner by combining a pulsating inexorability with a languid dreaminess — using lyricism (mezzo-soprano Jennifer Webb’s richly melodic voice) to warn us against lyricism! With the third song, Mayn Tjile (My Prayer), horn, double-bass and bassoon combined to evoke the foreboding doom of Halpenn Leivick’s poem of alienation, while mezzo-soprano Lynn Torgove gave her voice a deeply expressionist angst that cleverly subverted Leivick’s rebellion by turning it into a de profundis. In the next song, a setting of Kadya Molodowsky’s famous poem Eyl Khanun (God of mercy), Weiner once again skillfully instrumentaled the human voice (here the nuanced voice of soprano Karyl Ryczek) in order to contrast the frailty of the human soul with the immensity of the burden that God places on his elect. How is a wish for fatherly protection the fons et origo of religion when God elects his chosen ones to suffer? The final number, setting the last verse of Psalm 19 (“Let the words of my mouth be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord”) answers the question by transcending human finitude. A mysterious horn/cello combination was soon joined by Peggy Pearson’s melodic oboe to invite more and more voices into a growing chorus of trust expanding out to the far-reaches of time to create a distinctly oceanic feeling, punctuated with the radiant voice of the flute.

As though starting symbolically in medias res and emphasizing the continuity of an ancient tradition and of a vocation, Lazar Weiner’s son Yehudi Wyner chose to start his Torah Service with a prelude-like setting of Yihuy L’Rotzon, staking out a sacred space with great effectiveness, here in the sonorous, steadfast voice of Cantor Ian Pomerantz. A great burst of brass with core inner colors marked the opening of the Ark and taking out of the rolls, and the chorus shouted out to God in tribute, but also with yearning and insistence, as though forcing God to pay attention to his people on earth. There followed a haunting, rhythmic procession in which the music conveyed man’s temptation to succumb to inertia at every painful step forward. Fear of inertia, in turn, prompted an urgent, even raucous invocation to God as protector and guide through the desert, but also a plea to be purified (“Rise up, Lord, and scatter thy enemies”). After the ritual of
purification, the Torah reading itself came as the gentlest possible illumination, in hushed solemnity, conveyed by marvelously tender and self-controlled brass, implying that, whereas we shout for God’s attention, God speaks gently and in wisdom. The ensuing doxology (Y’hal’hu) soared upwards in ravishing waves of gratitude and praise, especially in the fervor of the women’s chorus. Most beautiful and solemn of all, to my mind, was the final section, after the scrolls have been returned to the Ark, and the congregation is left ambiguously alone, and God’s doctrine is affirmed to be the “tree of life” that grows in the heart. Wyner’s score conveyed an ineffable depth, a sense of the wondrous possibility that spiritual maturity is within man’s destiny, along with a profound acknowledgment of the tests that this implies. The overpowering sense of the sacredness, of our human imperfection combined in equal measure with joy and gratitude, captured the fons et origo of religion in a direct, timeless way. I can only hope that Wyner’s Torah Service, preceded by Weiner’s songs, will one day be performed in Notre-Dame. And surely, if the great Sigmund had heard it, he would have revised his view that religion is merely an illusion.

After intermission, we were torn away from the most profound sacred space imaginable and invited to step out into the sunlit world of the parvis — where we were treated to a popular theater/festival, René Morax’s and Arthur Honegger’s mixed-media event, Le roi David, performed here in flawless but utterly unpretentious French. Narrator Nael Nacer’s beautiful poetic phrasing quickly captivated us in the story’s swift unfolding and succinct, austere score. Close to artists who pioneered Dadaist collage, Honegger imported the method into music by integrating a wide variety of musical styles, with mixed results, but not without a sense of the musical universe of ordinary workers and daily footsoldiers, of whom King David will say that they “are his flesh and bones.” Placing the Witch of Endor on the first balcony in the middle of the audience and the “celestial” choir of angels up higher on the second balcony, worked well to accentuate a popular parvis experience. Honegger gave the march of the Philistines a memorable flavor of the grotesque and of brutality that anticipated Shostakovich, while the longest piece, the 12-minute dancing around the Ark (Torah service), produced a cacophonous, joyous, almost orgiastic atmosphere tinged with charivari. The heart of the story, David’s acknowledgement that he was “born in sin” (Psalm 51) and must turn to God again and again for forgiveness, was thoroughly Calvinist — the Psalms being to Calvinists what choral settings are to Lutherans. Thus Le roi David operates on three levels, moral, allegorical and analogical, despite its théâtre populaire format and transmits a Calvinist trust in God “as my strength and my redeemer” more for the sake of acting justly than for protection (think of Pastor Trocmé). Most surprisingly, given this Calvinist framework, King David’s death, lyrically marked here by Popper-
Keiser’s cello, gave rise in this retelling to angelic and messianic prophecies that converged in a forward-looking gaze upon and immersion into a distinctive oceanic feeling.

Anne Davenport is a scholar of early modern theology and philosophy. She has published books on medieval theories of infinity and Descartes. Her most recent article is on Atomism and providence in 17th-century England.

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3 Comments [leave a civil comment (others will be removed) and please disclose relevant affiliations]

Dear Anne,
Thank you for the kind review. I just have one quick correction:
A Hazzan (חזן) or “Cantor” in most American Jewish movements is actually an ordination (סמיכה) which is conferred after about five years of intense study in a cantorial degree program - a distinction which I, alas, cannot claim.
I am just a shaliakh tzibur (שליח ציבור), a cantorial soloist and a bass-baritone.

Comment by Ian Pomerantz — May 14, 2017 at 1:07 am

Thank you for this correction. I appreciate the trepidation [sense of reverence] that prompted your clarification. There was so much exquisite singing that I could not name everyone — but the timbre of your voice was especially remarkable, with gravity turning mellifluous at key moments, free of any hint of false inflation. Hearing you made me realize that the cantor’s voice “connects heaven and earth” — Abraham Heschel might say that it connects the written Torah to the “heavenly Torah.”

Comment by A Davenport — May 14, 2017 at 9:00 am

Thank you, Ashley. I am honored and humbled.
Cantata Singers is doing incredibly important work right now and I’m excited to be a part of it.

Comment by Ian Pomerantz — May 14, 2017 at 4:33 pm

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