



VANGUARD

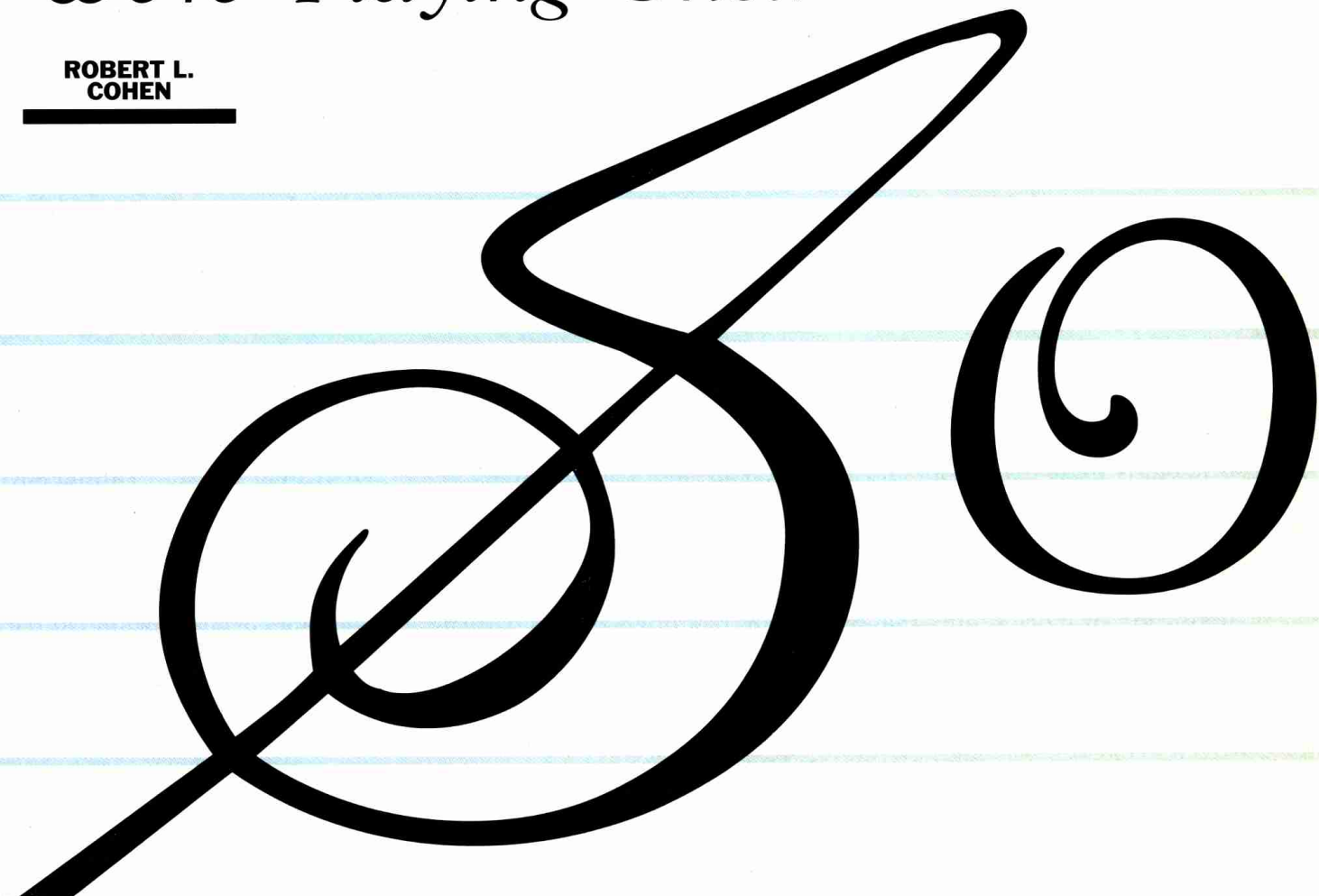
Klezmer, the street and wedding music of Jewish Eastern Europe, exemplifies the Jews' gift for "importing" secular melodies into their religious traditions. The Klezmer Conservatory Band, part of the modern movement to revive the klezmer sound, often records Jewish songs based on Slavic folk tunes and other non-Jewish influences.

Several years ago in an Orthodox synagogue in Brooklyn, I heard the rabbi sing one of the *Hallel* psalms to the melody of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." The rabbi, who fancies himself a '60s kindred spirit but is quite "right wing" in practice, would undoubtedly be distressed to learn that the melody of "This Land" was not original to Guthrie but, rather, was borrowed from an earlier song that in turn used the melody of a Baptist hymn.

He need not have worried. The appropriation of melodies from secular folk and popular music and even from non-Jewish religious sources has a long history in Jewish folk and liturgical music—as it does in other religious music and in all folk music.

We're Playing Their

ROBERT L.
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Indeed, the borrowing phenomenon is prevalent enough to have a name: Musicologists call new words written to an old or existing melody a *contrafact*, and some of our most familiar songs—like “The Star Spangled Banner,” which originated as an English drinking song—fit this pattern.

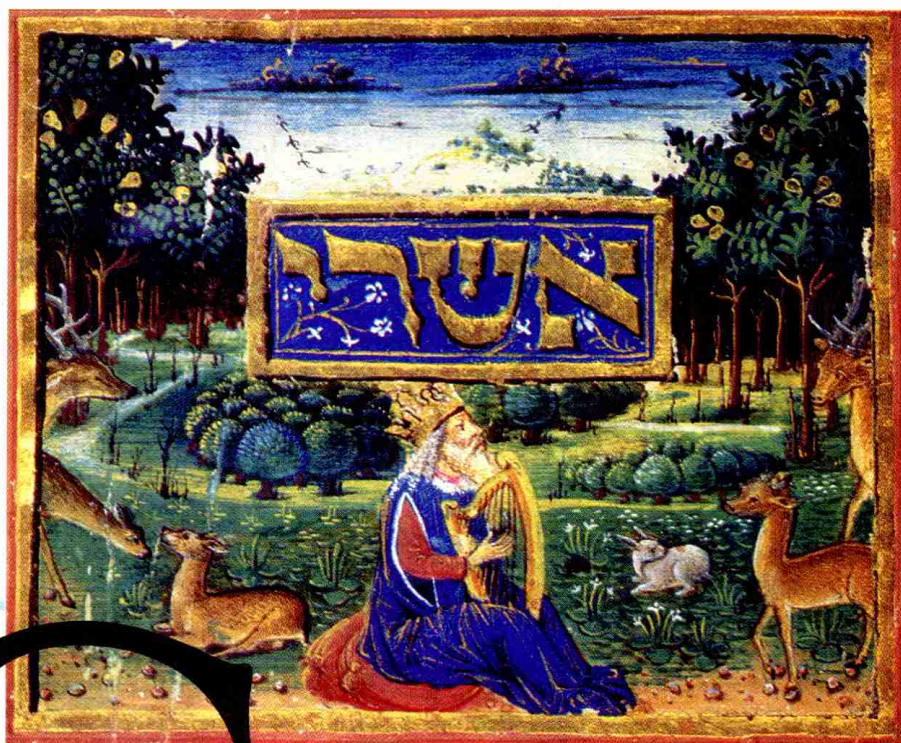
Songwriters turn to well-known melodies whenever they want words to be quickly learned and widely sung; thus, contrafacts are a staple of war songs and anti-war songs, union organizing songs, civil rights songs and political campaign songs. Many songs composed in the Lodz ghetto during the Holocaust were likewise intended to be sung to familiar melodies.

Borrowing in Jewish music is only one example of an impulse that has always led Jews to incorporate appealing aspects of their sur-

rounding cultures—dances, stories, language—and give them a distinctly Jewish flavor and character. Ahad Ha’am referred to a Jewish genius for assimilating without being assimilated. Jewish music has reflected not only the styles, rhythms and instrumentation of surrounding cultures, but specific melodies—a practice that, when applied to religious music, has not been without controversy.

In Jewish religious music, borrowing may date as far back as the Psalms. Many of them were set down with anomalous superscriptions (“On the hind of the morning”; “On roses”) that bear no apparent relationship to the text. Some Jewish music historians believe that these words may refer to contemporaneous songs to which these psalms were intended to be sung.

Did King David, depicted below in a fifteenth-century illuminated rendering of Psalm 1 (*Ashrei*) in his legendary role of musician, chant psalms to non-Jewish melodies? Enigmatic superscriptions on many ancient psalms may designate a contemporary melody to which they were sung.



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**When Jewish Words
Are Set to
Non-Jewish Melodies,
It's Strictly Kosher**



Benny Goodman (left) and Ziggy Elman borrowed a 1919 Jewish hit, "*Der Shtiller Bulgar*," when they recorded "*And the Angels Sing*" in 1939. The jazz greats became part of a long chain of borrowing to and from Jewish music.

Certainly by the time of the Second Temple, melodies of Greek origin were already part of Jewish worship—which we know (not uncharacteristically, as we will see) from rabbinic objections to the practice. "Alien" melodies continued to infiltrate Jewish religious life in every era, particularly as dispersion exposed Jews to non-Jewish musical cultures and as the writing of *piyyutim* (original Jewish hymns) increased the demand for new tunes. Melodies were "purloined," as music historian Alfred Sendrey puts it, from taverns, from the streets and from the Church; from French troubadours and German minnesingers; from Arabic love songs and Italian minuets and gavottes; and from folk songs, pop tunes and operatic arias.

The traditional Ashkenazic

melody for *Ein Kelohenu* evolved from a German church hymn; the traditional *Ma'oz Tzur* ("Rock of Ages") from a conflation of two sixteenth-century German tunes, one of which was adopted by Martin Luther as the first hymn of the Lutheran church. Even the venerable so-called *M'Sinai* tunes associated with the High Holidays betray the influence of German folk song, and the High Holidays evening *Borchu* derives directly from a twelfth-century church melody.

(Lest this overly distress Jewish worshippers, it should be noted that Gregorian chant—and, thereby, all of Western classical music—most likely evolved from *our* Second Temple liturgical music. The thirteenth-century Jewish poet Immanuel of Rome imagined he heard gentile art music crying out,

in the words of Joseph [Genesis 40:15]: "I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews.")

To be sure, the rabbis continually denounced the importation of foreign tunes into the synagogue and issued numerous edicts and responsa (legal opinions) to this effect, but to no avail; cantors and laypeople did it anyway. "The rabbis began to observe with alarm," notes a sixteenth-century historian, "spirited lovers' songs applied to holy psalms." "What shall we say and how shall we justify ourselves," declaimed the famed preacher of Mantua, Yehudah Moscat, in 1589, "as regards some of the cantors of our day, who chant the holy prayers to the tunes of popular songs of the multitude and thus, while they are discoursing on holy themes, think of the original ignoble and licentious associations!" His concern, then, was that popular tunes would inevitably distract the cantor—and, presumably, the worshipers.

Other condemnations focused on the bad taste—spiritual and aesthetic—of the service leader: A nineteenth-century New York Jewish newspaper carried a denunciation of the "grotesque" experience of hearing sensitive religious texts declaimed to dramatic operatic passages. Even today, taste and appropriateness are often absent in renditions of the synagogue's most ubiquitous contrafact, the hymn *Adon Olam*. This *piyyut* can be sung to almost any melody, from the elegant "Scarborough Fair" and the lofty "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to, regrettably, the theme song from "Jeopardy." Traditionally, *Adon Olam* was sung not only at Friday evening and Shabbat morning ser-



Lenny Solomon and his Shlock Rock band record Jewish parodies of popular rock songs, like "Go to Shul" ("Don't Be Cruel") and "Under the Chupah" ("Under the Boardwalk") in albums like "Sgt. Schlockers Magical History Tour" (above).

vices but under the wedding canopy (in Morocco), before retiring and even at a deathbed—where, presumably, one would not sing "Jeopardy."

In any case, the various rabbinic condemnations of borrowing melodies do not always agree on exactly what they are condemning. Some proscribed all gentile songs; some only sensuous Arabic songs; some—this was Maimonides' position—sensuous songs in any language, including Hebrew. Some forbade all melodies learned from Muslims, or from Christians.

But not all authorities were so disapproving. Rabbi Joel Sirkes (Poland, 1561-1640), in a responsum, held that though "they sing in the synagogues the melodies that are sung in the churches," only "such melodies as are...traditionally or characteristically part of the Christian ritual can be banned." Israel Moses Hazan, an Italian rabbi of the nineteenth century, report-

ed approvingly that the Jews of Smyrna, when in need of fitting tunes for Rosh Hashanah, would visit Christian churches "in order to learn those melodies which invoked in the congregation a spirit of humility." In modern times, the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Ovadia Yosef, approved of secular melodies in the synagogue if they lead the congregation to a religious experience.

Sephardim have a long history of borrowing and adapting melodies—from the folk songs of their countries of dispersion as well as from the Judeo-Spanish folk song repertoire (whose songs themselves are often derived from non-Jewish ballads). In his published collections, Israel Najara (c.1555-c.1628), our most prolific composer of Shabbat *zemirot*, specifically indicates the Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Italian or Spanish melody to which he intended each to be sung.

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