Tuesday, December 15, 2009

**Who Can Retell?** Among the holidays of the Jewish year, Hanukkah may surpass even Passover in the sheer number and variety of the songs devoted to recalling, retelling, and rejoicing in the events of the past and their evergreen message.

For American Jews of a certain age nostalgic for their childhood, Diane Ashton deftly surveys the English-language ditties of the 1950’s, from “Who Can Retell” to “I Had a Little Dreydl” and beyond. Today's casual consumers have their pick of dozens of new CD’s in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew, folk, rock, and heavy metal, many of them rivaling the Christmas market for kitsch. But curious listeners and antiquarians are hardly without other resources.

From its files, the website of the Judaica Sound Archives unearths a Hanukkah miscellany by the once-famous basso Sidor Belarsky (1898–1975). The Jewish Music Research Centre of the Hebrew University offers a recording of Abraham Abuganim (1908–2002) performing a children’s Hanukkah song of his own composition, as well as a contemporary women’s choir singing the Hanukkah blessings in a 19th-century musical setting. Also in Hebrew is an entrancing 50-song medley from the pre-State period of Jewish Palestine.

Non-Jewish composers have turned a hand to Hanukkah as well. In the 19th century, Benedetto Marcello incorporated an Italian Jewish melody to Maoz Tzur in a setting for voice and instruments of Psalm 137; it was performed in November in Washington D.C. under the auspices of *Pro Musica Hebraica*. Better known by far is Georg Friedrich Handel’s oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* (1747), a thrilling reenactment in music of the struggle of the ancient Jews with their enemies.

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**Hanukkah Songs of the 1950’s** Diane Ashton. *Religions of the United States in Practice*. A short survey of earlier American Jewish music followed by a discussion, with lyrics, of old favorites.

**Festival of Melody** Sidor Belarsky. *Judaica Sound Archives*. Traditional renditions with operatic flourishes.

**Darling Candle of Mine** Abraham Abuganim. *JMRC*. A 1952 children’s song becomes a prayer in the hands of a Sephardic cantor, composer, and ‘ud player from Jerusalem.

**Blessing the Lights** Choir of H.C. Miller Cantorial School. *JMRC*. In this performance, to a setting by the French-Jewish composer Samuel David (1836–1895), the blessings are linked by the melody of *Maoz Tzur*.

**A Hanukkah Medley** Various Artists. *Zemer Reehet*. From the archives of the “emergency project” to rescue and preserve Hebrew song. Includes a Hebrew rendition of Handel’s “See the Conquering Hero Comes”, see below.

**From Despair to Triumph** G.F. Handel. *Judas Maccabaeus*. The oratorio, conducted by Robert King with the King’s Consort.

**See the Conquering Hero Comes** G. F. Handel. *Judas Maccabaeus*. The tune of this chorus was later adopted for the hymn “Thine be the Glory.”

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**SAVE "Who Can Retell?"**