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Hebrew Melodies As Songs:

Why we Need a New Edition

By PAUL DOUGLASS

Tom Moore was working on his *Sacred Songs* when the first edition of *Hebrew Melodies* appeared in 1815. Stung by unexpected competition from Byron, he told his publisher James Power that he resented “that fellow Nathan, who is puffing off his wares in all sorts of quackish ways.” Speaking of his own “Fall’n is thy throne O Israel!”, Moore flattered himself it was “both words and music, a very tolerable hit.” But, he continued, “was there ever any thing so bad as the Hebrew Melodies? Some of the words are of course good, tho’ not so good as might have been expected--but the Music! ‘Oh Lord God of Israel’ what stuff it is!”¹ Moore’s judgement was one of pique--after all, what was the musical *stuff* of his own *Sacred Songs*? The words of “Fall’n is thy throne O Israel!,” adapted from Jeremiah, must have sounded incongruous even to him when he heard them sung to Martini’s “Plaisir d’amour”, the melody chosen by Power. *Sacred Songs* typified the “national melodies” fad in London; its lyrics were simply splices to borrowed strains of Mozart, Haydn, and the popular airs of Avison and Stevenson.

In direct contrast stand Nathan’s and Byron’s *Hebrew Melodies*. Here there are “Hebrew melodies” which inspired composition. Here the music is *involved* with the lyric in a way we have not fathomed, for Moore’s judgment has been echoed in musical if not poetical circles,² and Nathan’s settings have sunk into obscurity. Since 1829 the music has not been reprinted except for limited individual copies of a few songs offered no later than the 1850s.³ Aside from the loss of historical context caused by the music’s rarity, there has also been a loss of insight into the lyrics that makes it long past time the *original* Hebrew Melodies were reprinted and Nathan’s collaboration with Byron re-evaluated.

Son of a cantor, Nathan (1790-1864) attended Jewish boarding school at Cambridge, prepared for the rabbinate under Solomon Lyon, and in 1808 determined for a career in music. He was apprenticed to a superb voice teacher, Domenico Corri (1746-1825), and by 1810 had become his chief assistant. Nathan had observed Corri’s success in

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publishing books on vocal training and volumes of "Scotch Songs." He sought also to emulate his master-- or more precisely, his master's friend and colleague, John Braham (1777-1856), the first cantor to succeed on the London and continental stage. In 1812 Nathan eloped; in 1813, needing money, he came up with the idea of *Hebrew Melodies*.

Nathan went on to become George IV's music librarian, a tutor to Princess Charlotte (to whom the first edition of *Hebrew Melodies* was dedicated) and a successful voice teacher and popular composer. Among his hits was, for example, "Why are you wandering here, I pray?" from James Kenney's *Sweethearts and Wives* (1823), the most popular song in London in its day, and one for which a new edition was called as late as 1883.⁴ In the late 1820s, however, he got himself into debt performing some sort of "espionage" (exactly what is still not clear) for the royal family. Though he had friends in court, he was never secure, and the beginning of Victoria's reign meant the end of hopes for recovering cash (£2,000) lost in these clandestine activities. Nathan voluntarily emigrated to Sydney. There he distinguished himself as a publisher and impresario. Historians still denominate him the "Father of Australian Music."⁵

In the winter of 1813-14, however, he hoped simply to cash in on the national melodies fad and the current literary fashion for the stereotyped "wildness and pathos" of gypsy Jews. He put an advertisement in the *Gentlemen's Magazine* of May, 1813, announcing a book of "Hebrew Melodies," "all of them upwards of 1,000 years old and some of them performed by the Antient Hebrews before the destruction of the temple."

In London, Charles Dibdin and his sons ruled fashion. They combined with numerous composers--including Reeve, Attwood, Moorehead, Kelly, Sanderson, Bishop, and (on occasion) Braham and Nathan themselves--to write hundreds of songs of banal lyric set to mindwrackingly repetitious melodies "Italianated" by trills and chirrup. The London appetite for facile music and vapid texts--with accompaniments accessible to the pianistically illiterate--seemed almost limitless. To avoid being sucked into the stream of mediocrity represented by the Dibdins and their cohorts, Nathan needed both the ethnic allure of the music and a great name for lyricist. Turned down by

Sir Walter Scott, he approached Byron through Douglas Kinnaird, who vouched for Nathan's talents and repeated his claims that the music was identical with that sung by the Hebrews before "our blessed Lord & Saviour came into the world."⁶

The record of Byron's agreeing to work with Nathan has been substantially explored by Ashton and Slater,⁷ with the important omission that Nathan's own description of the relationship, contained largely in his *Fugitive Pieces and Reminiscences of Lord Byron* (1829), has been discounted because he so liked to give himself airs. But if it is taken with healthy scepticism, rather than anti-Semitic hostility, Nathan's statements of fact prove to be corroborated by some details and contradicted by none. Byron really did spend time with him reconciling matters of sound and sense, and the impetus for the writing clearly came from Byron's hearing what Nathan billed to him as "real old undisputed" synagogue tunes. Byron's collaboration with Nathan, according to this view, must be understood as a unique attribute of the *Hebrew Melodies*.

That recognition compels review of a case that has actually been on the record for years: the specific musical content, and the dramatic capabilities of the composer, who had a fine voice and (according to Leigh Hunt) the ability to make a piano "shake like a nut under the vehemence of his inspiration,"⁸ obviously affected Byron before the composition of all but a few of the lyrics. This is a fact to which Ashton alludes in his definitive edition of the lyrics, but which goes unexploited by him. Indeed, other than my own recent essay published in the *Studien zur Englischen Romantik* series, no significant discussion of the musical content of *Hebrew Melodies* has appeared in eighty years.⁹ The reasons for this neglect are not far to seek.

Nathan had made sure his songs were based on actual synagogue tunes transcribed in London and Canterbury, a step in the direction of genuine musicology that went well beyond what Sir John Stevenson had mustered in his settings of Moore's "Irish Melodies." He had also been careful to include subtle use of real cantillatory techniques, reaching in some cases back to the cantillation of the Masoretic text. And he had secured the help of his friend at the London Times, Robert Harding Evans, to write a critical essay to support the volume. This preface, titled "An Essay on the Music of the Hebrews," was no imposing work of criticism or scholarship. It merely reviewed the biblical mention of music and the role of musical expression in Jewish culture and lore.¹⁰

But the essay did not come out with the music. Douglas Kinnaird, irritated at the composer's intimacy with Byron and afraid of reviews pooh-poohing the music's antiquity, vetoed Evans' work and replaced

it with a terse introductory note he wrote, signing Nathan's and John Braham's names.¹¹ Thus, despite Nathan's efforts to establish the authenticity of his music, the first volume of *Hebrew Melodies* made no claim for its origins. Evans' essay was printed separately by John Booth in 1816, but the absence of any assertion of the music's historical interest, together with Nathan's earlier brash claims, have left a lasting false impression that the *Melodies* were never based on genuine synagogue music. This in turn brought down the stock of Nathan's music for Byronists.

The issue was raised by some reviewers immediately. William Roberts, writing for the *British Review*, doubted the authenticity of *any* synagogue music, and called Nathan's claims "trifling and irreverent" (*British Review*, August 1815).¹² Brisk initial sales prompted by Byron's departure from England in 1816 were followed by less brisk sales of the revised edition of *Hebrew Melodies* published in four numbers from 1824-1829. (Remember that Murray had in 1815 expropriated the lyrics for publication, over the composer's strenuous and justifiable objections that he had been given sole copyright.)

Late-nineteenth century musicologists were disappointed that Nathan had selected Ashkenazic rather than Sephardic melodies.¹³ Abraham Idelsohn decided that the tunes were, with a few exceptions, "not traditional at all," but simply "melodies created or adopted by various *chazzanim* (cantors)."¹⁴ Idelsohn, hearing *Hebrew Melodies* with an ear conditioned by the great Romantic composers and (of course) Wagner, was unimpressed. Francis Cohen, too, judged that most of Nathan's music was "poor; and it has deservedly sunk into oblivion."¹⁵ This verdict has been gently corrected in the more recent work of Eric Werner, the inheritor of the field. He finds:

The music does not presume to be written for the synagogue, but it was clearly music based on *minhan ashkenaz* It is true that the arrangement of the traditional tunes (left) a good deal to be desired in craftsmanship, especially in the rather childish set basses. But the style of English 'domestic chamber music' was of exactly the same caliber and compositional skill.¹⁶

The music is actually better than that. Joseph Slater has put the matter in a more just light when he suggests that Nathan's music is at least as noteworthy as Byron's lyric.¹⁷

The point here is double. First, to understand the musicological sources of *Hebrew Melodies'* tunes, one must see that Western harmony had already thoroughly invaded synagogue practice by 1813. The music Nathan was hearing and transcribing would more likely have come from Stoke-on-Trent than from Zion's hills. Nathan had some grasp of this. He certainly knew the music was not 1000 years old. But he believed, with many of his contemporaries, that the traditions of the

Askenazim had been preserved through hundreds of years. Musicologists seem to have abandoned research after establishing the relatively corrupt nature of the synagogue sources Nathan used. For example, there were but six identified synagogue tunes to which Cohen and Idelsohn pointed around 1900, and these were the first six melodies of volume one. My research has shown that at least four others in the first number of *Hebrew Melodies* have definite sources in known synagogue tunes.

“She walks in Beauty,” “The Harp the Monarch Minstrel Swept,” “If that High World,” “The Wild Gazelle,” “Oh Weep for Those,” and “On Jordan’s Banks” were all adapted from tunes for Chanukah, Pesach, and traditional parts of the service, like the chanting of Qaddish and Yig dal. Additionally, “Jephtha’s Daughter,” “Oh Snatched Away in Beauty’s Bloom,” “My Soul is Dark,” and “Thy Days Are Done” have sources in the “Song of Songs,” and folk melodies adapted for the High Holydays and Pesach. We speak now of a field in which clear sources are very difficult to establish. The second volume of *Hebrew Melodies*, for which I have not as yet found likely musical sources, almost certainly makes use of the same research on which Nathan based his first. So, while Nathan made exaggerated claims, his music has genuinely “Hebrew” sources by any fair standard.

The second point is that the settings have artistic merit, whatever Cohen and Idelsohn may have thought. Nathan tried a little of everything in arranging his raw materials—generally succeeding, as with “We Sate Down and Wept,” occasionally missing the mark, as in his maudlin version of “Thy Days are Done.” What is fascinating about the *Hebrew Melodies* as a group is that they compose a crossroads of contemporary musical fashion. They appeared at a crucial moment in the development of the Romantic art-song. Schubert wrote one hundred fifty songs in that summer of 1815, as Nathan worked up his second volume. The tastes of English and Continental listeners were moulded on presumptions about music very different from those which would be prevalent a scant five years later, when the performances of Paganini in Milan had made him synonymous with Romanticism, and when Liszt had made his debut at the tender age of nine.

Nathan’s offerings reflect the taste of the Dibdin era, to be sure. The settings are often strophic, based on an Italian model. But they are stylistically varied, and challenging in their piano accompaniments—occasionally even difficult. One reviewer, indeed, wished that the composer had created “more simplicity of accompaniment” (*Critical Review*, April 1816). Were the texts widely available, one could check the 1815 version of “Were My Bosom as False,” or the later “A Spirit Pass’d Before Me” (1824-9 edition) to prove this point.¹⁸ Like Byron, Nathan faced the problem of finding ways to “put on” Jewishness, for

he intended his music to sell to an audience that would necessarily cross into the market for Braham's, Dibdin's, and others' work. He resolved the problem in a variety of ways, and he was not ashamed to harness his tunes to the horses of currently fashionable forms; love-songs, hymns, oratorio, anthems, folk-songs, and of course, the expected "lament."

The reception of the German composers in London had to be prepared for by the creation of "National Airs," without which it is hard to imagine London abandoning its love affair with the facile Italian style. And Nathan's contribution is not a small one. One hears in his oratorio-style setting of "Saul" ("Thou Whose Spell Can Raise the Dead") the great impact Byron was yet to have on Anglo-European music of the century. One thinks of the Manfred and Cain figures of Berlioz and Liszt, Tchaikovsky and Verdi, Schumann and Mendelssohn, all of whom made the most of Byron's Grand Poseur of Melancholy in opera and song. That impact was what Charles Ives had in mind when he denounced Romantic music as committing a "Byronic Fallacy."¹⁹

Of course, for Byron readers, the question is, how does hearing Nathan's original music affect our understanding of the poems and the poet? I shall suggest briefly that to which we may look forward when a new edition of Byron and Nathan's work finally appears, restoring the initial context of tone, rhythm, and ethnic savour in which the poems (with the exception of the initial few given by Byron to Nathan) were actually conceived. Two important general areas present themselves. On the one hand, Byron's treatment of the Old Testament texts and lore responds to Nathan's music. On the other, Nathan's musical treatment of the texts responds to Byron's interests in irony, liminality, and posing.

The first poems Nathan set were those Byron apparently seized from a sheaf on hand in mid-September, 1814. They included "She Walks in Beauty," "Sun of the Sleepless," "Francisca," "It is the Hour," and "Oh Weep for Those." We know Byron was impressed by the lilting "She Walks in Beauty"; it apparently remained one of his favourites, and was placed first in both subsequent editions. With the exception of the latter song and "It is the Hour," a typically well-crafted piece of "Italianation," the other settings evoked the mourning with which the *Hebrew Melodies* so often seem drenched.

Mourning and militarism are two elements in Nathan's music to which Byron seems to have responded. We can probably account thus for the very existence of such lyrics as "We Sate Down and Wept," "The Destruction of Sennacherib," and "Warriors and Chiefs." "We Sate Down and Wept" became one of those songs in which Nathan made full use of the modal steps and cadenzas that marked solo cantillation. He

provides "ad lib" notes wherever the harmonic context affords opportunity. John Braham, who gave the "Melodies" their first performance, was renowned for his improvisations, and he was himself a cantor. In this song, as in "The Wild Gazelle" and "Oh Snatch'd Away in Beauty's Bloom," Braham would have found ample opportunity to introduce a quarter-tone step, or perhaps simply a slide or slur that would suggest the Oriental quality his audience--including Byron himself--found so piquant.

The performances of poems set to music, let us hypothesize, led to further poems for setting. Originally, Byron had no intention of contributing more than that first sheaf. Many accounts have been offered of his motivation to write more *Hebrew Melodies*, including his desire to appear more devout in the eyes of his wife-to-be and her family. But why is it far-fetched that he simply became excited by the ethnic thrill of Nathan's music and company, as well as by his role as a "songwriter"? Let us further hypothesize that Nathan's account of their collaboration is in some measure accurate: "At the time his Lordship was writing for me the poetry to these melodies," Nathan writes, "he felt anxious to facilitate my views in preserving as much as possible the original airs, for which purpose he would frequently consult me regarding the style and metre of his stanzas. I accordingly desired to be favoured with so many lines, some pathetic, some playful, others martial, &c."²⁰ This too accords with the variety of lyric actually extant in the complete set of the "Melodies."

If we follow these hypotheses we arrive at some interesting insights. Let us take the sole example of "Jephtha's Daughter." Nathan may not have understood Byron deeply. But he seems to have grasped at least that, for Byron, irony, like style itself, never ends. This lyric, which has been condemned as prosodically weak and narratively unbelievable, shows Byron's and Nathan's ability to work a limited model into a fairly rich tapestry.

Recall that this tune is based upon a genuine synagogue melody (the chanting *Shir hashirim*, or the text of The Song of Songs). The waltz-step is of the same provenance as that Nathan used in "She Walks in Beauty," but here composer seems to have grown, and poet to have written lyric expressly for the melody. This simple explanation for the otherwise puzzling ineptness of *poetical* craft in the poem has not occurred to criticism because it has not listened to the music.

Byron and Nathan give, we know, a very different reading of the Jephtha legend--one in which the daughter, far from grovelling in anguished pleading for her life (as in earlier operatic versions), speaks with terse formality. The clipped lines evoke the courage of one fully aware of the ironies of fate--*when they are sung*. The words by

Jephtha's Daughter.

The Poetry by Lord Byron.

The Music by S. Nathan.

DA 016.

loco

Since our Country our God oh my Sire Demand that thy

Daugh-ter ex- -pire Since thy Triumph was bought by thy Vow

Hobsw Mehdia N° 1.

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themselves, as many have observed, not only do not convey this impression, but undermine it. Byron (as lyricist) is interested here in the same thing that interests him in "She Walks in Beauty": the quality which sheer *poise* can give to a situation. The difference between Jephtha's daughter's defiance and the self-possession of the woman who walks in beauty like the night is one of shade, not kind. The gentility and ornamentation of Nathan's setting cause it to deconstruct itself as we listen, and in achieving that additional distance it reaches a higher plateau of nobility.

One cannot, of course, fully appreciate that effect in "Jephtha's Daughter" without having heard it. Nor can one grasp the intention of poet and composer without knowing something of the musical mood out of which the entire idea grew. Nathan's original tunes and his often clever settings are the indispensable counterpoint to the now-famous lyrics.

Nathan's and Byron's was a peculiar partnership; there were certainly mixed motives on both sides, and Nathan did finally have to choose between ethnic integrity, good music and financial success. He sought all, but craved money first, quality second, and musicological accuracy came third. Despite this, his work is often excellent and retains a significant musicological content. Byron, for his part, liked playing friend to Nathan, and it is tempting to praise his openmindedness, comparing him to crude Kinnaird and jealous Moore. Byron's letters still abuse the Jewish moneylenders with racist invective, however. He had choices to make, as well. His fascination with the Zionist and poet-in-exile themes afforded by the *Hebrew Melodies* project did not free him of prejudice. But he was motivated strongly enough by *noblesse oblige* as to stoop to become involved with Nathan--certainly more involved than he intended, and more than we have realized, since criticism has ignored Nathan and the music at the cost of an enriched appreciation for the *Hebrew Melodies*.

NOTES

¹*Notes from the Letters of Thomas Moore to His Music Publisher, James Power*, ed. Thomas Crofton Croker, New York, J.S. Redfield, 1853, p. 46.

²That is, recently. Opinions of Byron's lyrics have risen substantially since it was usual to comment deferentially on *Hebrew Melodies* as an indulgence to be excused. Here is one typical example from E.C. Mayne's *Byron*: "The real 'Hebrew' songs (i.e., 'poems') are uninteresting, and were written mostly at Seaham. Our schooldays were brightened by 'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold'--but it is wise to leave the pleasant memory in place." *Byron*, New York, 1913, II, p. 46.

³*A Selection of Hebrew Melodies, Ancient and Modern, with Appropriate Symphonies & Accompaniments by I: Braham and I: Nathan, the poetry Written Expressly for the Work by the Rt. Hon. Lord Byron*, London, C. Richards, 1815, no.2, bound with a reissue of no.1, C. Richards, 1816. These two numbers expanded to four in 1829, when Nathan completed a revision and augmentation of the work begun in 1824 with the publication of no. 1 (London, Fentum, 1824, 1827, 1828, 1829).

⁴Quoted in Olga Somech Phillips, *Isaac Nathan: Friend of Byron*, London, 1940, p. 85.

⁵I am indebted for details of Nathan's life to Ms. Phillips' book, Charles H. Bertie's *Isaac Nathan: Australia's First Composer*, Sydney, 1922, and Catherine Mackerras's *The Hebrew Melodies: A Life of Isaac Nathan*, Sydney, 1963.

⁶Letter to Byron of Sept. 15, 1814.

⁷See Thomas L. Ashton, *Byron's Hebrew Melodies*, 1972, and Joseph Slater, "Byron's Hebrew Melodies," *Studies in Philology*, XLIX (1952), 75-94.

⁸Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and some of His Contemporaries*, 1828, I, 187-8.

⁹Paul Douglass, *Isaac Nathan's Settings for Hebrew Melodies*, in *English Romanticism: The Paderborn Symposium. Studien zur Englischen Romantik*, no. 1, 1985, pp. 139-152.

¹⁰Robert Harding Evans, *An Essay on the Music of the Hebrews*, 1816.

¹¹Braham had agreed to appear as co-author of the music and give a first public performance in order to promote sales, though he would do none of the composing.

¹²Reviews of the *Hebrew Melodies* have been reproduced in *The Romantics Reviewed*, ed. Donald H. Reiman, 1972, part B, I-V. References to these reviews appear in the text noted parenthetically by periodical and date.

¹³"Ashkenazim" generally refers to that community of Jews that had emigrated into Germany over a period of centuries; "Sephardim" refers in the same general way to Jews of Spain and Portugal.

¹⁴Abraham Zevi Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development*, 1929, p. 338.

¹⁵Francis Cohen, "Isaac Nathan," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1925, vol. IX, p. 179.

¹⁶Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard: The Sacred Songs of the Ashkenazic Jews*, 1976, pp. 221, 321.

¹⁷Slater, p. 86.

¹⁸Nathan performed such extensive revisions on the later *Hebrew Melodies* that one can literally chart the course of London's changing musical tastes through systematic comparison of the settings.

¹⁹The history of the settings of *Hebrew Melodies* in the mid and later 19th century would occupy many pages--Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Schubert, and Mussorgsky set selected *Hebrew Melodies*. Carl Loewe's is by far the most ambitious challenge to Nathan's possession of the poems; see his *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 1. *Lieder aus der Jugendzeit und Kinderlieder*, Leipzig, 1899. But here we must beware imposition of an habitual anachronism on the interpretation of settings of *Hebrew Melodies*. Nathan's versions--whatever the verdict on their quality--are original to the work and must be treated differently from those of any other composer, however distinguished.

²⁰Isaac Nathan, *Fugitive Pieces and Reminiscences of Lord Byron*, London, Whittaker, Treacher, and Co., 1829, p. 51. *Fugitive Pieces* reprints in its first eighty-one pages the lyrics, annotations and commentaries included in the 1824-9 edition of *Hebrew Melodies*.

