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## **A Renaissance Composer, Actively Jewish When That Wasn't Easy**

By BARRY SINGER

As a court composer and a Jew in Renaissance Italy, Salamone Rossi was, in the simplest sense, a successful crossover artist. At the time of his ascendancy at the Gonzaga court of the Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo I, beginning around 1587, Jews in Italy were confined to ghettos and deprived of nearly all legal rights. Yet Rossi, from the age of 18, found himself employed making music for royalty.

Others could be said to have preceded him: a handful of Jewish instrumentalists and composers like the lutenist Giovanni Maria, who, in 16th-century Rome, served at least three popes. Of these pioneering Hebreo musismakers, though, nearly all, including Maria himself, converted to Christianity, succumbing to ecclesiastical pressures of the workplace.

Not Rossi. Successfully pursuing the tightrope walk of his secular career, Rossi managed to remain actively Jewish; so much so, in fact, that in 1622 he published his own liturgy for the synagogue, "Hashirim Asher l'Shlomo" ("The Songs of Solomon"), a collection of 33 psalms, canticles and hymns written with the express intent of "modernizing" the ancient chant of Jewish prayer.

Unlike the songs of his predecessors, much of Rossi's music survives and is still sung today. To hear the Hebrew of standard Jewish prayers surface within the church-conjuring sound of one of his madrigals is to experience the truly delicious shock of the unexpected and very nearly inexplicable. To examine the music -- the ancient notation running left to right, the Hebrew written right to left but placed at the end of their vocalized musical phrases -- compounds one's amazement. How did this all come to pass?

A Salamone Rossi festival, on Sunday and Monday at the Kaplan Penthouse at Lincoln Center and the nearby Merkin Concert Hall, will try to answer this question with lectures by the foremost Rossi-ites and a concert of Rossi's secular and religious music. Conceived and organized by Matthew Lazar, director of the Zamir Choral Foundation, the festival will try to chip away at Rossi's utter anonymity beyond the insular worlds of early-music aficionados and Jewish liturgical devotees.

"My reason for doing this is to establish Rossi as a hero," Mr. Lazar, a 54-year-old New Yorker, said recently from Tel Aviv, where he was giving a concert. "It's very hard to have a music tradition without heroes. The British have Purcell. Everyone has Bach. Who do Jewish musicians have? Rossi is really our first hero."

Descended from an illustrious Italian family that traced its ancestry to the exiles carried off to Rome from Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70, Rossi had an upbringing privileged enough to include extensive musical education. His initial fame came as a violinist. "He was so good, the duke would loan him out to other duchies to impress them," Mr. Lazar said. "As a result Rossi crossed paths with nearly every important non-Jewish musician of his day, including Gastoldi, Viadana and Monteverdi."

It was, in part, the musical breakthroughs of these masters of late Renaissance and early Baroque music as well as his own innovations that Rossi introduced into the synagogue. Unsurprisingly, he encountered resistance. Judaism had long guarded its traditional chanting modes against outside influence, particularly the taint of church music. Rossi was deeply sensitive to this, and his efforts at modernization fully reflected this sensitivity. Thus the community's rabbinic leader, the forward-thinking Leon da Modena, ultimately gave Rossi's music his blessing.

"Even though he was a fabulous instrumental composer, Rossi wrote all of his Jewish music a cappella," Mr. Lazar said, "so it could be performed in the synagogue, where instruments have been prohibited since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Rossi also almost never repeats words whose repetition is prohibited in Jewish liturgy, like the words for God and the words for bow down.

"People said then what they say now about his music: 'It doesn't sound Jewish. It sounds churchlike.' But where did Gregorian chant come from? It came from the Temple in Jerusalem. That is the source of all early Christian music."

The Rossi concert, which will be on Sunday at Merkin, will feature two choral groups interpreting the two dominions of the composer's vocal music. The Italian, secular works will be sung by the Western Wind Vocal Ensemble. "In order to do full justice to Rossi's Jewish settings, though," Mr. Lazar said, "I realized I would have to create a new vocal group using singers who were as connected to these Hebrew texts as he was, and yet, at the same time, understood early-music performance practice and style, people who, frankly, had somehow sung church music from the period. Now that's asking a lot. We've been working together about a year now, the Mantua Singers."

Apparently, Rossi rose so high in Mantuan society that he was exempted from wearing the orange-stripe badge required of Jews in Mantua. Listening to his "Kaddish" today, one can't help intuiting a sense of triumphant affirmation in this minor-scale motet, the sound of proud

survival, simply and eloquently stated.

"Rossi did three things that were significant," Mr. Lazar said. "For secular music history and instrumental music history, he was the primary force behind the invention of the trio sonata, which he does not get enough credit for, by the way. For vocal Italian madrigals, he pretty much invented the use of two 'dueling sopranos' in five-part madrigal harmony, as well as any number of innovations in instrumental accompaniment. But for the Jews, he is the first true choral composer, one who moreover set texts with a genius for word painting that still blows minds today. To the end, he was a faithful son of his religion."

In 1627 Duke Vincenzo II, the second of Rossi's bosses, died. Three years later, Mantua was overrun by the Austrian troops of Ferdinand II. The ghetto was looted and eventually leveled, its nearly 2,000 inhabitants expelled or slaughtered. The story of Salamone Rossi ends here. No record of his death has ever been found. After producing so much glorious sound, he departed in silence.

#### Concert and Lectures on Salamone Rossi

The Salamone Rossi festival will take place on Sunday and Monday at the Kaplan Penthouse of Lincoln Center and at the nearby Merkin Concert Hall, 129 West 67th Street.

On Sunday at the Kaplan Penthouse, an open sing is planned at 1:30 p.m., followed at 2:30 p.m. by lectures with American and Israeli scholars. A concert of Rossi's secular and religious music by the Western Wind Vocal Ensemble and the Mantua Singers will be on Sunday at 8 p.m. at Merkin Concert Hall.

On Monday, lectures continue at the Elaine Kaufman Cultural Center at Merkin Concert Hall, beginning at 9:30 a.m.

Tickets are \$36 and \$50 for the concert alone; \$135 for all of Sunday's events; \$75 for Monday's events; and \$195 for an all-festival pass. Information: (212) 362-3335.

Photos: In the music (above left) of Salamone Rossi's "Songs of Solomon" (cover, above right), the musical notation runs left to right and the Hebrew runs right to left. Matthew Lazar, right, has organized a Rossi festival. (Richard Lobell)