

BOŻENA MUSZKALSKA (Poznań, Wrocław)

## *To Converse in Song with the Infinite*

The subject of my reflections are the songs of the eastern Ashkenazy Hasidim, which serve them as a means of communicating with the transcendent world in their religious practices. I shall endeavour to outline the symbolic order expressed by these songs and also to explain their social function.

In order to understand the social context of communication via music among the Hasidim, one needs to be aware of Jews' predilection for the esoteric, confirmed in the times of misfortune which have befallen them, from the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem to contemporary times. Successive mystical movements within Judaism have clearly been the consequence of the persecution experienced by the Jews and their wish to escape from the gloomy realities into an inner world.

The Hasidic movement, which began to develop during the second half of the eighteenth century in Podolia and Volhynia, was intended to remedy the discontent that perdured within the Jewish community as a result of the weakening of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, which led to the Partitions, Bohdan Chmielnicki's Uprising and the Cossack Wars. Of considerable significance was the admission into this movement of the lower social strata, marginalised by the Orthodox Jews. The spiritual father of the movement is considered to be Israel ben Eliezer, known as Baal Shem Tov ('Master of the Good Name'), or Besht for short (c.1700–1760).

The eastern Ashkenazy Hasidim adopted in their mystic conceptions the 'Lurian Kabbalah', created among the mystics of Safed – a town in northern Israel which arose after the Jews' expulsion from Spain. This doctrine concerns the divine, angelic and demonic spirit world and the world of humans in its spiritual and corporeal dimensions, and the mutual relations between the two. It attributed to musical notes a special power of influence, in connection with the manifold links with the cosmos that are ascribed them.

According to the principles of Lurian Kabbalah, the performance of music is a theurgical act, in which man can influence, by means of melody, the decisions of God and – as a consequence – the condition of the earthly world. This conviction is linked to the idea that what is supernatural is a shadow of that which is on earth, and a melody rising from the earth can act on its shadow.

In the opinion of the mystics, it is natural for man to feel the need to sing when he wishes to make contact with the Almighty. As a product of the natural world, song finds its roots in the upper realms of the universe. Testimony to this effect, according to *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the thirteenth-century 'Book of Splendour' referred to by Luria, is the last verse of Psalm 150, the final psalm in the Book of Psalms: 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!' – in song, it is to be understood.<sup>1</sup>

The mystics of Safed took from older sources the teaching on the four worlds (overlooked in the Zohar), which has a connection with music. These worlds are *atziluth*, the world of divine emanation, *beriah*, the world of creation, which is the world of angels, *yetzirah*, the world of formation, which is the world of the archetypes of the visible world, and *asiyah*, the physical world of action, the lowest of the four. In the same way that the immaculately pure rays emanated by divine substance become increasingly contaminated as they move down to the lower worlds, then purified when they return back up to the highest world, so songs are gradually relieved of impurities on their journey upwards through the four successive worlds.<sup>2</sup> They open the gates of heaven, through which man, in a state of meditation, may pass and behold God. The act of singing gives him strength for this spiritual 'climb'.<sup>3</sup>

A favourite motif of the Zohar is the singing of the angels in praise of the Most High. Humans participate in this heavenly music, intoning songs on the earth. The songs attain optimum power when the Israelites sing the hymns on earth and the angels do the same in heaven. This resonance between the micro- and macrocosm is reflected in the Kedushah prayer with threefold repetition, 'Holy, holy, holy'. The Zohar describes three choirs of angels with their own guides, which repeat these words from different points on their orbit of the heavens.<sup>4</sup> Both this mystical context and the structure of the Kedushah determined the an-

<sup>1</sup> Amnon Shiloah, 'Symbolism of Music in the Kabbalistic Tradition', *The World of Music* 20/1 (1976), 56–65.

<sup>2</sup> Moshe Idel, 'Conceptualisations of Music in Jewish Mysticism', in *Enchanting Powers. Music in the World's Religions*, ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan (Cambridge, 1997), 159–188.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Amnon Shiloah, see above, n. 1.

tiphonal way it is performed during services in the synagogue; the descriptions of the situation are sung by the cantor, whilst the angels' responses are sung by the faithful.

Another motif in Lurian Kabbalah which manifests faith in the existence of communication between the earthly and transcendent worlds is people's participation in *tikkun olam*, the repairing of the world following the cosmic catastrophe that occurred during its creation. Humans play an active part in this repairing and in the work of salvation by complying with the rules of the law, praying, mortifying themselves and meditating. God and man work together to redeem the world, and for both sides music is a means to this end. It acts as a medium of communication between them and a common tool in their fight against the forces of evil.

In order for man to become a vessel prepared to receive the rays of the divine light and the emanation of His grace, he must unite with God. This uniting, or *devekut*, is achieved through prayer with an appropriate emotional mood (*kavanah*), but this mood can only be attained if man first feels *simha*, or absolute joy, and *hitlahavut*, enthusiasm. There are various ways of arousing these emotions, but the best is song, as the joy contained in the sound of the music that comes from the Holy Spirit is passed on to man. Sadness, meanwhile, should be avoided, as it creates a distance between man and God.

The Hasidim imparted to these ideals of Lurian Kabbalah a broader social and practical dimension. To a greater extent than their predecessors, the mystics saw in the individual human being a divine 'partner' in *tikkun olam* – the repairing of the world. Baal Shem Tov taught that the constant maintaining of a state of unification with God through song enables man to rebuild the ancient Temple in Jerusalem inside his own soul. Quoting a verse from Psalm 100, 'Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs' (Psalm 100: 2), he indicated that joyful singing is the duty of the pious and helps them reach God's throne.<sup>5</sup>

A unit of musical repertory that is characteristic of the Hasidim is the *nigun*. The word derives from the verb *nagen*, which in biblical Hebrew probably meant 'to sing'. The Hasidic *nigun* is a sort of continuation of Kabbalistic songs, although it is not quite the same thing, since students of Kabbalah came from the scholarly environment and were ascribed special abilities. The *nigunim*, meanwhile, can be sung by all, including the uneducated members of the community. In contrast to the music that accompanies Kabbalistic meditation, they are also performed outside of rituals, since – so the Hasidim claim – they have the power to transform

<sup>5</sup> DovBer Pinson, *Inner Rhythms* (Northvale, 2000).

the world.<sup>6</sup> Their sound is perceived as a channel between the spiritual and material levels of existence and enables communication along transcendent realities. It alters the sense of time among its performers and initiated listeners, and also changes their being in the world,<sup>7</sup> taking them out of the realm of ordinariness into extraordinary surroundings, into a different time and space, which lie within real time and space.

As the Hasidim see it, the *nigunim* are a universal medium of communication. They are a characteristic sign of the Hasidim, distinguishing them within the Jewish community and formerly marking them out from their opponents, the *mitnagdim*. The *nigunim* mellow the soul and open it up to a more spiritual type of perception. They are a divine product here below. If they are sent upwards, they become purified, as they are spiritual energy – a human equivalent of divine beings. They express the yearning of earthly beings for a return to their Creator, open the gates of the celestial world and enable those who meditate in song to enter that world.<sup>8</sup>

In the Hasidim's conception, the *nigunim* spring from the source of holiness, from the 'temple of music'. The Hasidim perceive song as the 'soul of the universe', since the whole of God's kingdom sings, God's throne breathes music, and the Tetragrammaton JHVH comprises four notes. In the opinion of the Hasidim, only a charismatic tsadik has access to the heavenly source of music. As a divine singer, he creates sacred melodies from divine inspiration.<sup>9</sup> In song he encodes his soul. Thus, if one sings a *nigun* by a particular tsadik, one makes contact with his soul and with the light that he discovered.<sup>10</sup> When a simple man listens to the singing of a tsadik, he is transported to the limits of the sacred world and is able to raise his soul, through the tsadik, to a higher level of existence. In addition, the tsadik possesses the ability to exercise control over the angels and over the emanation of power from the highest source, which he can direct onto his nation or stop. A high note protects against its flow, whilst a low note attracts it. Thus the influence here is in the opposite direction to that in the previously described conceptions. Sound is supposed to influence earthly, rather than divine, processes.

<sup>6</sup> Cit. after Eugenia Chazdan, 'Nigun chasydzki na tle pieśni kabalistycznych' [The Hasidic nigun against the background of cabbalistic songs], *Midrasz* 81/2 (2004), 10–11.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance. A Theory of the Relations Between Music and Possession* (Chicago, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Idel, see above, n. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in its Historical Development* (New York, 1948).

<sup>10</sup> Tzvi Freeman, 'Nigun', <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.htm/aid/67814/jewish/Nigun.html>.

Chaim Binyomin Burston, an active rabbi and Hasidic musician, states that:

the *nigun* is a purely Jewish song, which has its source in the holiness of its creators, a rabbi or Hasid on the highest level of unity with God. He composes the *nigun* in a state of experiencing God. The composer is a conduit through which the *nigun* travels to earth from a higher source. There, on high [...] is the source of *teshuva*, repentance, and the source of *brachot*, blessings, and also there is the spiritual realm of the *nigunim*, where they have all existed since the beginning of time and await a suitable Jewish soul, which will come to that realm and take the *nigun*, just like a blessing from the upper to the lower world.<sup>11</sup>

Rabbi Nachman of Braclaw, great-grandson of Baal Shem Tov, believed that everyone has his own *nigun*, which acts as a sort of key to the soul, just as a key opens a lock. The ancient Israelites found their *nigun* when, freed from the Egyptian Bondage, they sang with Moses a song to the Lord [Book of Exodus 14: 30–15: 1]. When this song is sung nowadays, from the Torah, it is possible to make use of the energy of that day to find one's own *nigun*, often hidden amid the worries of everyday life.

The main aim in the spiritual life of the Hasidim, as already mentioned, is to be constantly in the presence of the Everlasting, to maintain a state of communication with the Lord (*devekut*). Only in such a state can man participate in *tikkun olam*. Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic dynasty, compares the soul's climb towards God to taking successive steps on Jacob's ladder. With each step, the ordinary Jew, a servant of God who wrestles with his weaknesses, moves closer to the divine intellect and submerges himself deep in his own feelings. He gradually passes from a state of melancholy to a state of joy. The 'soul's climb' has four stages. First the soul begins to 'overflow', aspiring to leave the mire of sin and free itself from the clutches of the evil spirit. This is followed by spiritual awakening. On the next stage, the devout Jew is overcome by his own thoughts, and from this position heads towards *devekut*, or union with God. It is then that he proceeds to a fiery ecstasy and finally reaches the final stage, when the soul sheds its mortal weeds and becomes a bodiless spirit.<sup>12</sup>

The *nigunim* – especially those of the Chabad Hasidim – are constructed in such a way that they reflect the thoughts and feelings which appear at the different stages of this climb (all or only some of these stages). The way the melody moves to an ever higher register represents the soul's ascent to ever higher levels. In the beginning, the soul is at the

<sup>11</sup> Cit. after Mordechai Staiman, *Stories behind the Chassidic Songs that inspire Jews* (1994), [www.moshiach.net/blind/niggun](http://www.moshiach.net/blind/niggun), 10.08.2007.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Koskoff, *Music in Lubavitcher Life* (Urbana and Chicago, 2000).

lowest point and under secular influence. As the singing proceeds, the singer experiences an 'awakening' and is filled with happiness and joy, then he ultimately reaches the supreme level of consciousness. Hasidic mystics also discern a similar rise in emotional tension in many melodies in classical music.<sup>13</sup>

Most *nigunim* are sung without a semantic text, most commonly with the use of meaningless syllables, such as *ai, oi, ye, di, bam* and *de* in rhythmic, quicker *nigunim*, or *mam, am, ma* and *och* in slower *nigunim* with richer ornamentation. A characteristic feature is regional syllabication, which means that the repeated syllables betray the source of a particular *nigun*; for example, Hasidim from Międzyrzec sing *bim bom*, the Gur from Góra Kalwaria sing *yadi yadi*, and the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim sing *oy oy*.

It was believed that *nigunim* without words were produced from the soul itself and were able to penetrate the deepest sphere of human feelings and religious awareness. They are superior to recited prayers, as their expression is not limited by a text. These convictions are reflected in statements made by Rabbi Shneur Zalman: 'The songs of the soul – when they drift up into the high regions, to drink from the well of the Almighty King – consist only of sounds without words',<sup>14</sup> and 'Speech is the quill of the heart, whereas melody is the quill of the soul'.<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that the Hasidim do not write any *nigunim* with a semantic text, which may be taken from the Torah, Talmud and other holy writings or else from a folk song.

The singing of *nigunim* is often accompanied by dance, which already in the Zohar was deemed a more important means than the singing itself in *tikkun olam*. It is ascribed the ability to lift humans and everything created to God, and thus a special power in achieving *devekut*. Baal Shem Tov taught that dance and song could bring participants in a service much closer to the Almighty, and he also enjoined his pupils to perform bodily movements during prayer. Rabbi Nachman of Braclaw even considered that dance was a holy obligation, and devised a prayer which he recited before dancing.

Only men participate in Hasidic dancing. They most often move around in a circle, which signifies the symbolic equality of all the dancers. Each man is an equally important link in the chain; there is no front and no back, no beginning and no end. This style of dancing represents the

<sup>13</sup> Matityahu Glazerson, *Music and Kabbalah* (Northvale and Jerusalem, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Cit. after Abraham Zvi Idelsohn.

<sup>15</sup> Cit. after Mordechai Staiman.

idea of *devekut* among men and at the same time manifests man's unity with God.<sup>16</sup>

According to Hasidic beliefs, an important role in the musical process of *tikkun olam* is played by the adoption of melodies from a non-Jewish milieu. From accounts about Baal Shem Tov, we know that he spent many hours in the fields among shepherds and learned their tunes, so as to release the sparks of holiness that lay within them. In the Hasidim's conception, taking notes from an impure (secular) source, sanctifying them and transporting them, via the intermediary of song and dance, whence they came, to the 'heavenly palace of music', has the status of *mitzvah*, or obligation. Thus we find in *nigunim* the melodies of Polish, Ukrainian and Hungarian folk dances. Mazurkas and polkas appear in *nigunim* from the Gur, waltzes and *volach* in *nigunim* from Międzyrzec (Hasidim from Międzyrzec call their *nigunim* 'opera'), Russian-Ukrainian *korobochki*, and even a 'Napoleonic March', commemorating Bonaparte's reaching Moscow in 1812, in the melodies of the Chabad. Melodies by famous composers have also been assimilated.

To close, I would like to return to the social dimension of *nigunim*. Their intoning links the members of the Hasidic community with the general collective memory, with the past, present and future of the Jewish nation. For the Hasidim, this sense of connection guarantees the continuity of their existence, confirming them in their conviction of being the chosen nation and giving them hope of leaving the Diaspora. The singing through which the Hasidim connect with God allows them to achieve, in all conditions, a different level of awareness, on which they no longer think about suffering. In light of this, one is no longer surprised by the fact that *nigunim* were composed and performed even in the most dramatic situations during the Second World War.

*Translated by John Comber*

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<sup>16</sup> DovBer Pinson, see above, n. 5.

