

PROGRAM NOTE

(by the composer)

Nigun Prophecy was commissioned by St. Mary's University of Winona, Minnesota, generously funded by the Kaplan Foundation. Their gift is intended to bring awareness of Jewish cultural heritage to the Saint Mary's community and the surrounding region. The commission also includes, uniquely in my experience for commissions, a week's residency at the college to share what I can about the musical disciplines I have mastered, including composition, orchestration/band scoring, choral and orchestral conducting, and singing. And a little something of the experience of being a modern American diaspora Reform Jew and a musician.

The 2018 commission specified a work for concert band using Jewish musical themes. After I received the commission, through a rigorous competitive selection process, and had conferred with Music Director Janet Heukeshoven, I thought for a while about what themes might be appropriate, and decided that no texted songs would work as I needed them to for a concert piece. So I settled on the *nigun*—a traditional Jewish spirit song on characteristic rhythm syllables, typically sung by groups in unison, often as a prelude to worship, but also at other gatherings. (We class them generally as "bim-bom".) These have both vocal and instrumental qualities.

The piece is built around three common *nigunim*. Rather than research the vast trove of them that exists to pick some, I immediately wrote down, from memory, four that I recalled vividly for their musical and spiritual intensity. (Partway through sketching the piece, I narrowed that down to my favorite three—not an easy decision, as each has its compelling qualities.*).

(*I also belatedly realized that I needed to be sure that the tunes I was using were public domain. After some research querying Jewish music publishers, cantors, and cantorial schools around the US, I confirmed that two of them were—but that the third was *not*: it was written by the famous and beloved rabbi and cantor, the late rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. And it was still copyright. Possible problem. After further sleuthing, I made a connection with his talented daughter, Neshama Carlebach, also a Jewish singer and songwriter, who is carrying forward his spiritual and musical legacy. She readily and graciously agreed to license the tune to me for a single derivative use, and so the Crakow Nigun became my third and final basis tune for my new piece.)

Then an eccentric but pivotal notion occurred to me—I would not simply have the tunes played by the instruments in the band, I wanted the audience to hear them *sung*. Thus, the design of my musical setting requires each tune to be introduced and initially elaborated by singers, *preferably musicians from within the band*—who also play the instrumental band parts at other times. The conductor and players work out together who will sing, and when. (The printed parts provide both each instrument's notes and all the vocal parts.)

Auxiliary singers may also be added, up to a full chamber choir. This option allows for a collaboration between a college band and its local or campus choir(s), which is not a common opportunity. (It is preferred that they *supplement*, not supplant, the band singers. But the extra singers may also do all the singing, freeing the band members to just play.) The piece is also scored, using cross-cues, so that it can be played with just the instruments and no singing—this is not the composer's preferred option, but may prove useful in other contexts.

Partly for didactic reasons, and partly for practical musical reasons, I have specified that preparation for playing this piece should in all cases include singing of the *nigunim*, even for any band members who will not be singing during the performance of the piece. *Even if the piece will be performed with no singing*, the entire band should still engage in some teacher-led exercises singing the tunes together before they start to rehearse playing

the piece. This will familiarize them with the true expressive nature of the tunes, which is deeper when they are sung, and will also focus their intuitive grasp of how this new piece unfolds organically from these source tunes.

My approach in writing the piece was to juggle several common compositional techniques for handling a “borrowed” melody: “arranging” a song, simple variations on a theme, formal developmental extension or extrapolation, and integration of originally-composed material. The listener should note that most of the melodic material in this piece is not original to me—85% is derived from the *nigunim*—yet everything in the work bears the mark of my hand and voice, in the treatment and the techniques used. (Only two other pieces in my band catalog, the *Lifeboat Variations* (on Row Your Boat) and the *Cornucopia of Rounds* (7 of them) that I originally wrote as its finale, are derived almost entirely from common tunes not my own. I also have several other sets of variations in my *oeuvre*, some on other composers’ tunes, one on an original tune.)

The melodic character of the source tunes, for me, dictated much of the melodic and harmonic character of the piece which I wanted to write. They are all in a minor mode or key, their character or mood at least wistful, sometimes even rather sad. Stylistically, the piece is completely tonal; it *aligns* harmonically with the source tunes rather than opposing them with, say, paradoxically contrasting atonal modern material (an option I now select to use only in my music for the stage, for moments of stress, conflict, anxiety, or evil). At most, it has some modernish bitters or sour added to certain pivotal harmonies at significant inflection points. This tonal flavor also infused my own original melodic additions and extrapolations.

Structurally, these tunes are characterized by obvious repetition: Successive phrases often start in the same way, and there are many full phrases that are repeated, plus rhythmic refrains. These repetitions imprint the melodies and their sub-motifs on the ear and memory, and for me as a composer, they incited me to double down and use intensified piled-up repetitions as a tool for extending each tune after it is first laid out, to create an arc for each section that reaches some sort of climax or conclusion before we go on to the next.

There are many streams of traditional Jewish music; the one I am most familiar with is that of Ashkenazic culture (mid-European *diaspora* Judaism). Within that broad territory lies the narrower Hasidic tradition, in which the practice of almost ecstatic group prayer and song and wild free dancing, often after imbibing, is common (traditionally only among the men, though I feel compelled to point out that that is not the rule in my own Reform practice). Many tunes were created by rabbis for their community, often first improvised in the moment, then codified after they had caught on. These songs carry an energy of spiritual release, even abandon. This quality inspired me to try to create, intensify, and even overdo that sort of release musically several times in my piece.

In form the piece is a set of rhapsodic variations on the three traditional tunes, with a short but monumental coda. Each tune is introduced by voices who build it up and add simple harmony over light accompaniment. Then the singers stop singing and sit down at their places in the band while the instruments take up the tune and vary and extend it to make a sort of fantasy-variation, using my own added material to reach a climax and round off and conclude that section of the piece, then relax into the introduction of the next tune.

SPIRITUAL MESSAGE: This piece has no narrative “program”; it does not tell a story. But as I worked with the melodies and unleashed my own creative and developmental impulses that were stimulated by them, I realized that my setting, like the tunes, expressed something of the Jewish “soul” and our long historical experience. There is a sort of resigned wistfulness sometimes, as of people who have suffered long and hard under oppression, not merely as slaves in Egypt long ago, but also particularly after being dispersed widely in the modern *diaspora*. But there is also a sort of resolute, if somewhat fatalistic, determination to persevere. One might hear a recalling of ancient suffering in the first section, an echo of the nightmare of European Jews (and

