

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

other targeted groups, let us not forget) under Nazi Germany in the second section, and the determination of modern Jews to contribute to the healing of the world, spiritual and physical, in the third section. The Coda is a call to hopeful, brave action. It says: “Awaken! March! Act! Before it is too late! Never Again!”

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Here is a “music-analysis” road map to the sections in the piece:

After a short, loud, rhythmic introduction in unison full band, the first tune is sung by a solo singer over a threadbare accompaniment; then more singers join, then many in simple harmony as the accompaniment gets richer (I also add a few modest connective instrumental counterphrases). After the singers finish the tune, the band instruments pick it up and it is varied and extended, parts of it are broken off and repeated again and again in canons using harmonized blocks flung across different choirs of the band, piling up over a low pedal-tone tattoo, then relaxing to a two-note murmur in low instruments. Then I added a soulful closing melody of my own (trying for a Jewish family resemblance to this *nigun*) with the first melody covertly inlaid under it, starting softly, rising and swelling sadly to an almost tragic cadence chord in the full band, then winding down to an interrupted cadence. A short soft melodic timpani solo provides the join to the next section.

The second *nigun* is a waltz with an infectious “*yabba-babba bai dai dai*” repeated refrain. A ghostly Mahler waltz vamp sets up the singers, who introduce the tune in the same way as the first, gently building up harmony over a commonplace *boom-noodle-noodle* light band accompaniment, adding a thin counterline in high woodwinds. Then suddenly all the low brass take up the tune loudly, in a bent rhythmic form that subtly shortens certain notes and phrases to break the easy waltz feel and make it irregular, almost gimpish, while higher instrumental choirs add fierce off-beat accompaniment answers; on the refrain they add a harmonized echo-canon part. The effect is jarring, klunky, fierce, a little militaristic—as though a Teutonic marching band had decided to mock the gentle wistful Jewish waltz with their own brutal version—you may draw what allusions you wish from this image. After a silent-beat hiccup and a loud stamp, this loud full-band business suddenly breaks off by slowing down the tune where it rises to its highest, most soulful note, and sits on a new tragic, complex, full-band chord. This is followed by another composer-original episode, which is a series of increasingly dissonant yet still tonal tragic long full-band chords, a curling winding-down melody, another rise on a sweet harmony, and a poignant moment where the solo oboe is revealed holding a rather high note, then playing a graceful wistful turn to bring the section to a cadence. The opening vamp returns, slowed, and settles on a low chord in the reeds.

The third tune is the famous Crakow Nigun of Shlomo Carlebach (used by permission). It has always sounded to me like a march for freedom and “*Tikkun Olam*” (action to heal the world). Its second section in particular seems encouraging and hearty. This is also the one that seems to invite, even demand, clapping—and speeding up. So I yielded to those impulses as well in setting it here. This section starts differently, slow (slower than the normal tempo for singing this *nigun*), with statements of just the first motive of the tune in the bass instruments, and silences between, like an antique steam train engine starting up. Then all the male voices start the full tune, the women join in, the tempo starts to pick up, and they start to clap along, all this over an accompaniment featuring the mallet percussion instruments and timpani. This time, when the tune is repeated they get to participate in the canons, doubled by saxophones and low reeds. The singers break off, the woodwinds continue on the refrain in higher winds (over a sly quote from a more familiar Israeli song), the high winds and mallets continue, repeating and repeating an infolding diminution of the tune’s starting motif, rising and rushing almost out of control, until a “referee” cuts them off without a conclusion. A short pause yields to the Coda.

The Coda begins as though with slow restart of the Crakow Nigun in the bass instruments, but now this is answered by low drums (including an auxiliary low drum line if available—this effect was inspired by the All-Japan Taiko Festival finale which I witnessed in Narita in 2018) playing a short tattoo that echoes the *nigun*'s opening rhythmic motive, and in the background the marimbists play a shivery quiet sustained chord in tremolando. Now begins a final solemn slow march, a sad formal chorale melody in full band (the tune is original, with a family resemblance to the Israel National Anthem, *Hatikvah*), tragically harmonized. The bass group motif repeats and repeats as an *ostinato* accompaniment under the chorale and the drums repeat their pattern quietly. As the melody builds to a climactic cadence, the drums rise in volume. At the climax, the melody expands upward three times (each phrase moving from the cadential key of enriched C minor to a different near-neighbor harmony), and then the higher brass, still over the full band, give out a pattern of horn calls that is derived from the traditional calls of the *shofar*, the ram's horn (or kudu horn) instrument blown at the Jewish High Holy Days. This allusion does not exactly replicate the traditional calls (*Tekiah*, *Shevarim*, *Teruah*, *Tekiah Gedolah*), which usage might be interpreted as sacrilegious by some, but is close enough to evoke the *effect*. In this setting, the calls are intended to evoke a final call to return, repentance, and atonement, an urging to take up *Tikkun Olam*—the work for the healing of the world. The piece ends in a great rising melodic shout.