

Paulina Tendera

RECALLING THE SONGS OF BEIT HAMIKDASH: CANTORIAL CONCERTS AT THE SINGER'S WARSAW FESTIVALS

Memory can be transferred in many ways, whether we study the tools for its preservation or the form of what has been preserved. Most generally, we can say that memory (under which our knowledge and understanding of history lies hidden as well) is the element that creates our identity¹. Perhaps the character and personality of the individual are a matter of chance and genes, but for a culture, these things are accidental and contingent. However, everything that partakes of a rational nature is truly important in an individual: his identity, his knowledge of where he comes from, and consequently, by implication, who he is.

The content, which serves as the carrier of memory, exists primarily in the form of symbols. Philosophers of different epochs have reflected on the nature of symbols, following many different paths; there can be no doubt, however, that symbols exist and collaborate in the creation of the space of culture, civilisation, and individual identity. In the following reflections, we speak about the objective existence of symbols; we assume that they are something like abstract concepts ordering the realm of our thinking – principles of truth, logic, and rightness. A symbol differs from a concept in that it is embodied not in thought and speech, but in image and vision. In this way, symbols play a part in the field of culture and art – contemporary culture and art as well. A symbol is not easy to discern; too often today it is confused with metaphor, allegory, or simply (and most frequently) with a poetic approach to a theme. Many non-arbitrary principles govern the implementation of a symbol in art. It is impossible to list all of them since there is no way to establish a symbol once and for all; but certainly there are principles according to which a symbol, and thus its function within the content of cultural memory, can be investigated within a work of art. Within the framework of methodological reflection on this content, we will try to enumerate at least some of the rules of which we speak.

¹ For more information see: M. Schechtman, "Memory and identity", [in:] *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, vol. 153, No. 1, 2012 (March 2011), pp. 65-79 or W. J. Booth, "Communities of Memory: On Identity, Memory, and Debt", [in:] *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 93, No. 2 (Jun., 1999), pp. 249-263.

What does a symbol demand of us? It is difficult to clearly and categorically answer this question. Behind every symbol (provided that it is a true symbol) there always stands a tradition of hundreds of generations, characterised by the unbroken thread of a cultural community. Moreover, a symbol, although it has many meanings (one might venture to say that it is inexhaustible), there are strict rules for its interpretation, and there are also (due to its objectivity) erroneous attempts to understand it, resulting most frequently from ignorance, relativism, and lack of cultural knowledge. There is a kind of contradiction behind the nature of the symbol: its objectivity, its resistance to being limited. Therefore, I would like to propose at least a working list of theses and assertions about the symbol that will be helpful in its identification:

- (a) A symbol should appear in a religious or strictly philosophical context. In other words, speaking very directly, a landscape or description of nature in itself, for example, is not an appropriate area for the use of a symbol. Of course, there are works of art, including the paintings of the English artist Joseph Mallord William Turner, which delight in the expression of light. However, this is a delight of a sensual character; the feeling of elevation derives not from the interpretation of a symbol, but rather from the expressive, romantic, and poetic treatments of natural light. A similar case is that of the works of Jan Vermeer, who obsessively painted stained-glass (or dirty) windows in the course of a sunny summer's day. Many art historians and aestheticians claim that they possess a symbolic (and not, by any chance, poetic, expressive and aesthetic?) context.



Fig. 1. At conducting Yakov Rotner famous cantors: Yaakov Lemmer, Benzion Miller and Tzudik Greenwald, accompanied by Menachem Bristowski (Festiwal Warszawa Singera 2016). Phot. Janusz Paliwoda

- (b) We always read symbols in context; thus, if we are dealing with a work of art, whether theatre, music, or literature, our visualisation of a symbol depends on its introduction in meaningful relationships with other objects, relationships which serve as reciprocal verifications of symbolic sense. This use of a symbol does not permit interpretation to run freely in any direction; rather, it imposes on the viewer the necessity of examining these interrelationships.
- (c) A symbol should not be established (!) or developed by way of emotional stirrings and affects but is rather the subject of thought (a concept or idea) which should be derived from philosophical and theological reflection, i.e. seen and inferred from the work.
- (d) Interpretation of a symbol takes place on many levels; thus, for example, seeing a rainbow in a picture does not mean seeing the symbol of a rainbow in that picture. Explicitness does not come into play here. Reading about fire does not always indicate content about the metaphysics of light; the sight of a seven-branched candlestick is not equivalent to sighting a menorah (with its cultural significance), etc.
- (e) Experiencing and seeing a symbol has nothing to do with the aesthetic beauty of the presentation; if we speak of the beauty of a symbol, it should be beauty perceived by the intellect, in the Platonic sense (in other words, the beauty of mental objects partakes of the same nature as the objects themselves).
- (f) The origin of a symbol is determined by a particular culture and civilisation; to read it, one applies only concepts and categories accepted in the system from which it derives. Adding to the interpretation of a symbol new meanings from outside its culture of origin is a serious methodological error and stems from ignorance; it is a kind of cultural illiteracy, which is indeed very common today.² For example, this error occurs when we superimpose content from the Phoenician religion upon the interpretation of the Christian *claritas*, and freely add observations about Islamic culture to reflections on the Hebrew word *רוח* (light). This kind of 'linking' of cultures leads to blurring and forgetting the content of the cultural memory.
- (g) a symbol of something seen in the form of light, a rose, cross, circle, hexagram, etc. is not a representation of any specific thing or object, but rather of universals; more accurately, of the most generic things (literally, a representation that approaches the very concept of the thing in question). This is, of course, difficult (literally impossible) since sense objects cannot be deprived of all individual characteristics; there is always something to distinguish them; but in optimally generic representations it is easier to read the general nature of the concept and the symbol itself.

² In this context it is worth paying attention to the phenomena of cultural globalisation and multiculturalism, which are being propagated widely today. A symbol is not an element which can be transferred by a single individual living in isolation from their culture. A symbol binds communities and religious groups. It consists of legal, religious, and educational practices, family life, and so on. Wishful multiculturalism here is rather the constant painless blurring of the contents of distinctive social groups, mistakenly identified as a guarantor of cultural pacifism. It is, however, a powerful tool for the development of mass culture and consumption, very harmful for cultural identity, and, as a result, for cultural memory.

- (h) Symbols and metaphors referring to absolute things appear more frequently in static than dynamic representations, because they relate to unchangeable, permanent and often eternal things, whereas dynamism is associated with temporality, changeability, and periodicity, which do not apply to absolute things.
- (i) We see a symbol in the way we see text incorporated in a work, even if we see it as colours and composition, as the words of the work, like music. The tool for understanding the symbol is not sensation and perception, but the ability to 'read' it as we would do with written text. As regards cultural memory, it is important to note that its content (being symbolic) must also be read, and therefore cannot exist in a world of cultural and religious illiterates.

It is merely a preliminary suggested list of issues that we should raise in order to determine the presence of symbolic content in painting and art in general. Examination of works of art according to the proposed suggestions will bring us closer to answering questions about the presence of a symbol in a work, as well as making us aware of what we are really looking for. Doubtless, it is easier for many of us to do this with single isolated visual works and objects, more difficult with music due to its hermetic and challenging language. Penetrating to the source of civilisation, to the original and traditional languages in which cultural memory is written, enables us to remember that its contents are objective in nature. Cantorial singing, therefore, is one thing as a concert, but something else completely as a prayer performed in the original Temple in Jerusalem. Let us try to describe the content and significance of cultural memory using the example of such a series of concerts – specifically, those traditionally held during the Singer's Warsaw Festival.

These issues are very close to the idea of the Singer's Warsaw Festival, held for the thirteenth time in 2016.³ The main idea of the organisers of this undertaking is the restoration of memory – in other words, a reminder and a restoration of pre-war Warsaw, where Isaac Bashevis Singer lived and which he often nostalgically recalled in his books. The contrasts we encounter at the festival depend on the particularly sharp confrontation of the new with the traditional and very old. We also see this when traditional and orthodox religious contents are transferred to contemporary musical forms⁴ (e.g. R & B, reggae in the music of Matisyahu, jazz, ethno, and world music such as that of the Klezmatics⁵), theatrical forms⁶ etc., and when a living relic of a bygone world appears in our very modern industrial space. I emphasise the word 'living' here, because I refer not to an experience with an object from a museum, but

³ I thank Janusz Paliwoda for providing access to archival material from previous editions of the Singer's Warsaw Festival, as well as Izabela Teodorkiewicz and Nadia Issa for their help in preparing this article.

⁴ Cf. M. Tuszewicki, 'Piosenka jidysz dziś' [Yiddish song today], in: *Cwiszny. Żydowski kwartalnik o literaturze i sztuce* [Cwiszn: Jewish quarterly of literature and art], http://www.cwiszn.pl/files/files/tuszewicki_116-119.pdf [accessed 7 September 2016].

⁵ See also review from this concert: P. Tendera, "The Thirtieth Anniversary of The Klezmatics in Warsaw", <http://worldmusiccentral.org/2016/09/20/the-thirtieth-anniversary-of-the-klezmatics-in-warsaw/> [accessed 29 March 2017].

⁶ See also web page of Jewish Theater in Warsaw: <http://www.teatr-zydowski.art.pl/> [accessed 29 March 2017].



Fig. 2. Yaakov Lemmer (Festiwal Warszawa Singera 2016). Phot. Janusz Paliwoda

a scrap of the modern world in which tradition has been preserved, a scrap which has eluded not only oblivion, but the memory as well. Must a living, if unusual, a piece of the modern world struggle to be remembered? It is the issue I perceive in the phenomenon of and the huge interest in the cantorial concerts during the latest edition of the Singer's Warsaw Festival.

The issue of music and cantorial singing opens up before us a history that already dates back several millennia, one which, of course, I do not intend to rehearse in this article. We have to admit that research on cantorial singing and Israelite music have not yet been integrated into one tradition of consolidated teamwork, assured by generally agreed-on means of research, and by a central place of musicological⁷. There are outstanding rabbis and teachers in Poland who are familiar with this history and tradition. Rather, I wish to draw attention to one aspect associated with memory and the phenomenon of cantorial music, not only in Poland but throughout the world. It should be emphasised, particularly, that these works, which are essentially sung prayers, bear symbolic significance in terms of memory because their task is to evoke the music and prayers which, until 70 AD, were performed in the Beit HaMikdash, that is, the Temple of Jerusalem. We need to add that, of course, cantoral music is not the only Jewish music supported from Israel government as a support to Polish

⁷ See: E. Gerson-Kiwi, "Musicology in Israel", [in:] *Acta Musicologica*, vol. 30, Fasc. 1/2 (1958), pp. 17-26.

festival of Jewish culture, as we can see in the interesting article of Stanley Waterman titled "Variations on a Hebrew theme: The politics of art music in Israel"⁸.

Let us recall here the outstanding cantor Alberto Mizrahi, who has made several appearances in Poland in recent years (e.g. in 2011, during the Festival of Jewish Culture in Kazimierz, in Cracow). In an interview with Polish Radio, Mizrahi said:

I was eight years old when we left Athens, where I was born. My parents were very poor; the only thing I had in abundance was their love. When we came to America in 1956, the Jewish community took care of us. In Greece, we wouldn't have had a chance; in America my education was financed and my family was given a great deal of support [...]. I was educated in the orthodox spirit, which was foreign to my parents, who were not overly religious⁹.

The first steps that led Mizrahi in the direction of cantorial music were connected with the need to choose a religious path; they required him, in other words, to renew and strengthen his cultural identity. We can say that "...is not only an aesthetic value [...] but also a socio-cultural tool that contributes to the coherence of the society."¹⁰ As he writes, in Greece his family's religiousness was not very vital; it was only after his move to the States, where Jewish cultural and religious resources operated powerfully, that he began his conscious education. The great delight aroused in him by the famous tenor voices of the day, e.g. Mario Lanza and Enrico Caruso, encouraged him to study singing. This inspiration resulted in the need to connect Judaism with music. Alberto Mizrahi recalls his education at the cantorial school:

I was one of those who went to cantorial school right after high school. I was about seventeen or eighteen years old. Cantorial school is a kind of Jewish conservatory, but it is also something more. The curriculum includes the liturgy and other similar courses (...) I knew that the world of cantors was dying; their artistry was becoming part of history.¹¹

Mizrahi, I believe, expresses not only the situation of his own religion but also the consequences of the overall process of the secularisation of modern society. This artist sought inspiration, means of expression, a form, and method of action, but without a cultural identity, without powerful religiosity, he could not find them. In this sense, cultural relativism (which I understand here as being opposed to the categorical nature of religious laws) and secularisation formed a roadblock in his path

⁸ See: S. Waterman, "Variations on a Hebrew theme: The politics of art music in Israel", [in:] *Geo-Journal*, vol. 65, No. 1/2, Geography & Music (2006), pp. 113-123.

⁹ See: Polskie Radio Website <http://www.polskieradio.pl/7/178/Artykul/674982/> [access: 5 September 2016], "A cantor is not just a Jewish singer", interview with Alberto Mizrahi. See also: <http://albertomizrahi.com/> [access: 11 November 2016] and Milken Archive of Jewish Music: <http://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/alberto-mizrahi/> [access: 11 November 2016].

¹⁰ U. Sharvit, "Jewish Musical Culture - Past and Present", [in:] *The World of Music*, vol. 37, No. 1, Jewish Musical Culture – Past and Present, (1995), pp. 3-17.

¹¹ See: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/7/178/Artykul/674982/> [access: 5 September 2016], "A cantor is not just a Jewish singer", interview with Alberto Mizrahi.

towards truly great art. How, then, to choose a form and means of expression, if we are deprived of the content and meaning of what is to be expressed by that form? How can we ask 'how' when we don't know 'what'? Mizrahi goes on to explain:

The first generation to arrive in the United States needed to commune with this art, wanted to participate in ceremonies in the synagogue. Their children were deprived of this need. Interestingly, in the next generation I notice openness to religion and spiritual experiences. Surely it feels lost and is trying to find its identity; therefore, to a certain extent, cantorial art is alive, but lacks two essential elements. One is teachers: this is an art passed on orally from generation to generation. The master educates his student; the father passes his knowledge on to his son, the mother, in the area of women's songs and folk songs, to her daughter. On the other hand cantorial music is not just music, but a way of understanding the world: the people you meet, the food we eat, the temple. It's a combination of many issues.¹²

As Mizrahi himself points out, in the United States people are trying to maintain and renew this tradition, building schools and splendid synagogues; however, as he says, these actions are not sufficient; there is no way to renew interrupted cultural and religious continuity exclusively through external efforts and activities, since they are, in fact, the expression of something, namely, the needs of the spirit and the community that creates it. One should, therefore, take joy in the great success of cultural festivals, the interest in learning Yiddish, building of the Jewish identity and community in Poland and around the world; however, one should also be careful not to refer too lightly to these activities as rebirth, renewal, or recollection, because many of the threads and strands of culture now appearing on the music scene and in galleries around the world have already been broken once. Mizrahi concludes:

My generation still knew a certain continuity of tradition, but at some point I felt that I was lost in the wilderness. Of course, we are not bad at what we do, some of us are excellent in our craftsmanship, but we lack what our teachers had – grounding and a sense of belonging. [...] What makes me different is the real passion with which I do it.¹³

Jakub Skrzypczak, the member of the Shalom Foundation, the organiser of the Singer's Warsaw Festival, comments on learning about music and cantorial singing. Asked about the tradition of cantorial music, he says that, according to the tradition of the Hebrew language, this music is not directly related to the liturgy. It is also important that, when we go to a concert (the word *concert* is of great importance here, since fundamentally during the liturgy there is no concertising), to the opera, or to a festival, the cantor is accompanied by an orchestra. In the course of the liturgy, that is, prayer in the synagogue, we do not encounter this – cantors sing without accompaniment, and are not accompanied by any instrument. This fact has an important

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ The programme 'A cantor is not just a Jewish singer' was prepared by Justyna Majchrzak, 30 August 2012, for Polish Radio Program 1: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/7/178/Artykul/674982,Kantor-tonie-zydowski-spiewak-To-ktos-wiecej> [accessed 7 September 2016].



Fig. 3. Cantors Choir- a grand concert in 2014 (Festiwal Warszawa Singera 2014). Phot. Janusz Paliwoda

cultural context, which also refers to memory: in antiquity in Jewish temples, instruments were used, but, as Jakub Skrzypczak emphasises, today, as a sign of mourning, this is not practiced. The absence of music in the synagogue symbolises mourning in the wake of the destruction of the Temple by the Romans following the armed uprising of the Jews on 4 August of the year 70 AD.

In this way we reach the core (not the only one, but nevertheless...) of the ideological issue associated with cantorial music: in essence, it is supposed to constitute the restoration of the order that prevailed in the Temple of Jerusalem. Tradition (especially Hasidic) tells us that all of the beautiful and fine liturgical melodies were present in the ancient temple.

The performance of cantorial songs is, therefore, an art referring to an ancient tradition, which is thereby conserved and established. Its essence is remembering, as it constitutes an act of restoration of sacredness through the medium of singing, in which, above all, old and even ancient melodies are used. A cantor is not merely a singer, but an expert on the liturgy and an individual marking the celebration of a certain important holiday, familiar with the cantillation of the Torah (i.e. the established way of singing). The singing, as well as the person, of the cantor has always been surrounded with respect and recognition; beyond its liturgical role, the singing of the finest artists is simply an example of a beautiful and exceptional art. Thus it is not surprising that cantorial music is also featured at festivals, concerts and operas; however, it is worth remembering that this is not a contemporary innovation. The

renaissance of cantorial music was experienced in the twentieth century prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, at a time when cantors also performed in operas.

Alberto Mizrahi reminds us that for centuries the cantor was not only a singer but also (and above all!) a poet and creator of prayers; these most outstanding songs were used for extended worship and after some time became part of the classic Jewish prayer books.

Of course, with the passage of time, as is true throughout the living space of art, new trends appeared in cantorial music; however, the overall coloratura and ornamentation of singing has been preserved, and, for example, singing inspired by the sounds of instruments is still practised. The twentieth century introduced the possibility of using various recordings of singing, about which, however, the environment was initially skeptical. Following World War II, the world of cantorial music relocated to the United States.

One of the important ideas of cantorial singing is the recollection and maintenance in the consciousness of a great area of culture which often is no longer a part of our own heritage. For if we wish to say that this beautiful phenomenon of culture and religion indeed forms a part of our heritage, this requires of us that our identity should also belong to this heritage – that it should not be empty, ‘modern’, and indifferent, but powerful and objective. Alberto Mizrahi speaks here of a kind of struggle against the secularisation of society; and, in fact, secular society will never be a worthy heir to great religious culture, for it would be an heir ignorant of its benefactor. Nevertheless, despite warnings and sceptical attitudes, this gives us hope for the sustainability and longevity of cantorial music, in which, he says, strength



Fig. 4. Grand concert of cantors in 2013 (Festiwal Warszawa Singera 2013). Phot. Janusz Paliwoda

and youth, the work and passion of the artist, reverberate as in nothing else. As he himself says: it creates a gateway to religion.

In this article, I wanted to show installment or understanding of the term “memory”. And also how the objectivity and subjectivity mingle in it. In other words, I wanted to argue that tradition is only objectivity, although we can touch it with our subjective side.



Fig. 5. Cantors Choir- a grand concert in 2014. Phot. Janusz Paliwoda

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SUMMARY

In this article, regarding the examples of cantorial concerts tradition at the Singer's Warsaw Festivals, I present theoretical guidelines for describing the symbolic meaning of art. The philosophical perspective requires us to be objective in understanding the symbol. In this case, how can we distinguish the symbol from allegory, character, metaphor or figuratively? Here I propose the answer to this question.