

Michael Jolles

Text of speech delivered by Dr Michael Jolles on 6 October 2021 at the online (zoom) Book Launch (hosted by the European Cantors Association) of his *Encyclopaedia of British Jewish Cantors, Chazanim, Ministers and Synagogue Musicians: their history and culture.*

“Thank you. Good evening. I hope you will all have had the opportunity to see the *Encyclopaedia* on the PDF. Chazanim have been ignored by Anglo-Jewish historians. This book is the first substantial history of the profession in the United Kingdom and Ireland. By contrast, in the United States, Aaron Rosen had published his *History of Hazanuth* in 1924 (book shown to camera).

In the 2000 biographical entries (there are over 100 non-biographical entries), I have included not only chazanim, cantors, ministers (these of course overlap), a number of rabbis (I have included those rabbis who had served as ministers at *any* time in their career), but also choirs, choirmasters, choristers, recording artists, composers, arrangers, accompanists, musicologists, revivalists, patrons and selected aspects of synagogue history. The more entries that are included the better. If some individuals left only a tiny trace of their lives, they are certainly still included: all of their lives must be memorialised. Every chiselled-out vestige is treasured. After all, this is the equivalent of rescue archaeology. Certain traditions of chazanut are fast disappearing. Over recent years, Eastern European musical tradition has been squeezed out by preference for congregational singing, resulting in specialised nusach being lost.

Chazanut is ephemeral. The antidote to this collective amnesia of the vast majority of historical chazanim is a printed book (and these have been reserved mainly for libraries). Of course, most chazanim did not record for the gramophone. Apart from the biographies and synagogue histories (Ashkenazi and Sephardi), a 170-page introduction describes the nature and history of the chazan, involving their roles as sheliach tzibbur, teacher, shochet and mohel.

Chazanim and synagogue musicians are not to be forgotten. Today, we are grateful for our living in relatively comfortable times. The experience of a chazan of previous generations was often characterised by hardship, poverty, persecution, anxiety, migration and separation from their families. Details of pre-immigration and post-emigration activities are important, but elusive and typically lost or repressed. Many witnessed the extermination of people and culture. So much cultural heritage still continues to be lost as one generation succeeds the former.

So, the online version is the future. It is a free contribution to the Jewish community, to musicians and to various types of historians.

The PDF text is dynamic, and will expand and develop. It will be frequently updated. Users, whether academics, genealogists, aficionados or members of the public, are very welcome to contact the editors and contribute to the book. Those contributing to the text will be acknowledged. Why not develop a network of contributors, who can bring their unique expertise to this centralised global thesaurus of information?

Now, I would be happy for it to develop cumulative mission creep, cautiously, and to begin including international details (I have, for example, included Amsterdam already). There is no reason why it could not immediately be the world's go-to reference book on, not only on strictly Anglo-Jewish topics, but also on the chazanim and chazanut of overseas countries, especially those associated with British history or where British chazanim moved to. Those histories will not all write themselves.

So, finally, what material can be added? Any additional material or perspectives, overseas material, discographies, photographs, concert programme brochure notes, more bibliographical details of academic papers (and perhaps a brief synopsis of some articles), the repertoires and traditions and idiosyncrasies of individual synagogues, aspects of vocal quality, the history of various musical compositions, more information from local newspapers and minute books, and memoirs (especially from family members and pupils). Please do be in contact. It is yours to be involved with. I hope you will find it interesting and useful. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you."

APPENDIX

HISTORY OF THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA

How did the *Encyclopaedia* start? The original impetus was not musical, but biographical. In 2002, the final edition of my book *A Directory of Distinguished British Jews* (256 pages) was published. This comprised a set of over 50 compilations of the first British Jews who had been MPs, parliamentary contestants, knights, mayors, Fellows of the Royal Society, academics and musicians, as well as many others who had been prominent or noteworthy in various professions or walks of life in Britain. Several thousand names were recorded. (There was a section on Jewish musicians in Britain.) I realised then (at a time when the internet regarding Anglo-Jewish history was, frankly, of little use – this was 20 years ago) that there was no printed publication listing those British Rabbis and ministers who had been posted around the British Isles over

the previous 300 years. So I added to that book a final chapter listing whatever names of Rabbis that I could assemble, noting just under 1000 postings. In retrospect, that chapter, published in 2002, was the original seed of this work.

Next, in about 2005, I was invited to research for the *Palgrave Dictionary of Anglo-Jewish History*, which was published in 2011; I was one of the three author/editors. Although this dictionary included a small number of British cantors, chazanim and choirmasters, I soon found that there had been no systematic documentation of anything substantial about them, except for those in Rabbi Geoffrey Shisler's excellent website (on chazanim internationally). So, these were professions without documented histories – representing surprising lacunae in Anglo-Jewish historiography. I started to document them. I attended cantorial conferences, acquainted myself with the various related subjects, conducted interviews and extensive research, and gradually built up, in over half a million words, what became, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the largest published history of a nation's chazanim (and their related professions) in the world.

STYLE

I have been uncompromisingly protective of the style and tone of the *Encyclopaedia*. It is factual, systematically organised, and strives to accuracy, authoritativeness and comprehensiveness. The book covers all denominations, and is non-polemical, non-derogatory and non-hagiographical. What about viewpoints? Although the book is perched at the objective end of the spectrum, this does *not* mean that viewpoints cannot be expressed, provided that they are framed as viewpoints, and do not masquerade as facts or affect to represent an apparent but unchallenged universal consensus.

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