

Elgar

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

If anything will emphasize my heterodoxy, it is my taste in music. Jewish music, or what passes for it, really does not grapple with spirituality to anything like the extent, the profundity, and the passion (oops, wrong word) of classical music. However much I may enjoy Hasidic music, folksy [Carlebach](#), pop [Mordechai Ben David](#) or [Avram Fried](#), or the new wave of slick, syncopated pseudo-rapping, choreographed youngsters shouting out their eternal devotion, it pleases but none of it really moves me. The old, more profound and authentic Bobov or Modzits "[deveykut](#)" (the mystical term for getting closer to God) [tunes](#) do better.

But still, I have to admit, nothing, nothing that tries to convey the depths of religious spiritual experience or the desire to feel the Divine presence, succeeds for me more than Elgar's [Dream of Gerontius](#). Of course, I exclude the specifically Christian theological references, which have no significance for me. But the general theme, [the journey of the soul as it leaves the body and gets closer to its source](#), the mixture of apprehension and anticipation, the spiritual quest is so powerful, so sensuous, even sensual, in a strange way that it moves me religiously like no other piece of music (all it needs is to be translated into Hebrew).

I can date the moment of my corruption precisely. It was when my Uncle Henry, a highly knowledgeable aficionado of hazanut (cantorial music), gave me [Verdi's Requiem](#) for my sixteenth birthday. He warned me to ignore the Christological texts, which he said only made up a very small part of the piece, besides most of it consists of words lifted straight from the Jewish Bible or from our own liturgy. He also told me that many people regarded the work as Verdi's finest opera. He did not even hint at any danger from listening to a woman's voice—ah but those were different times. I was hooked on requiems ever since. My favorite is [Brahms'](#), with no New Testament references at all. Of course, when I studied architecture I became interested in important ecclesiastical buildings, too. Some people, no doubt, will say that this explains a great deal about my position in the spectrum of Orthodoxy.

Now, England is not known for the richness of its spirituality, nor for its musical talent. You might point to [Purcell](#); you might even want to include [Handel](#) (who, although an Anglophile and was once said to write music like an Englishman, was actually German). Some praise [Britten](#), but I cannot listen to him. For me Elgar is the greatest by far. "What," you will say, "[Elgar](#)? Elgar of [Pomp and Circumstance](#)? Of [Land of Hope and Glory](#)? That trivial popular music?" Yes, indeed, Elgar. Elgar of the sublime [Cello Concerto](#), and Elgar of Gerontius' dream. I have to say whenever I launch into one of my Anglophobe rants and suggest [the British are a nation of bourgeois shopkeepers](#) (not original I know) for whom religion is just another stage for class wars to play themselves out, a little voice always haunts me, "What about Elgar?"

Other religious works may have greater grandeur, more complex music. Doubtless Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were greater composers, but their religious works all sound more like performances to me, whereas this sounds more confessional. This speaks to my religious sense like no other piece of music where the music is completely without context. Kol Nidrei moves me, and [Bruch's cello rendering](#) of it is moving too—but there it is the context as much as the music that does it. The sight of banked rows of swaying Hasidim in black, singing lustily in praise of the Lord is incredibly impressive and moving too, but the music is often merely a step removed from Polish military marches. If anyone would ever ask me what piece of music is the most religious in itself, or the one that best describes the impact of religion on my life, this is it.

I saw a recorded performance of 'The Dream' on American TV recently. Colin Davis was conducting in St. Paul's Cathedral. Rows of English men and women choristers simply did not seem to go with feelings about God. Any more than Colin Davis's beard, without a moustache to fill it out, looked authentically Biblical. Nevertheless, if you can ignore the contradiction of an Englishman and heaven, this is Divine.

Yes, I'd rather pray with Shlomo Carlebach, and I'm sure I'd have had almost nothing in common in shul with Edward Elgar. But somehow something happened here. Some might say it was his universal Divine Soul that suddenly tuned in to the Divine wavelength. Some might say he must have had a Jewish soul somewhere in his past, a forced convert antecedent from the time of the Crusades. Who knows? All I can tell you is that it works for me and it reinforces my belief that God can be found in all places, not only my own.