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■ SYNAGOGUE CHOIRS AS INSTRUMENTS OF PRAYER: THEIR IMPORTANCE, ORGANIZATION AND TECHNIQUES

Based on an article by Dr. Ben Steinberg

WHY START A SYNAGOGUE CHOIR?

A choir is a voice—a strong expression of Judaism and community. When a synagogue choir sings well-written prayer settings, it communicates with congregants in a remarkably direct way, usually with far more effect than through spoken words. In a real sense, music is our most eloquent language. Why wouldn't all congregations want to express themselves through such a medium and at the same time provide congregant-volunteers with opportunities to enrich their religious services and experience a satisfying artistic and social involvement?

For both choristers who study the texts of their music and congregants who increase their understanding of these texts through listening or participation, a choir can be an educational device, revealing Jewish history, Jewish musical styles and religious meanings. For example, more of us have become aware of Sephardic culture through its music than in any other way. The great choral offerings of nineteenth-century German and Russian synagogues, the music of Salamone Rossi in early seventeenth-century Italy and the more recently discovered repertoire of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Holland, France and Italy all produce artistic and historical insights into our faith, in addition to nurturing our pride in Jewish singers and their congregations.

It is important to note that a congregational choir must offer much more than mere entertainment. If its repertoire has been intelligently conceived, a choir can actually illuminate the meanings of prayer texts, injecting into them understanding and discernment, as well as an emotional component that surpasses mere words. Of course, in order for a choir to communicate with its listeners, basic choral standards are a necessity. Just as rabbis must speak clearly and cantors must sing on tune, choruses must achieve a reasonable level of vocal skills.

As a choir's musical competence grows, its presence can not only adorn a prayer service with beauty, it can also inspire worshipers in prayer. In addition, it can expand the messages of liturgical texts by encouraging congregants to participate in singing along with the choir at appropriate times. This is a powerful musical device that not only involves worshipers in music but also reinforces key ideas in prayer texts, since congregational assent gives extra strength to specific texts within beautiful choral settings. Thus in a very real way, a choir can act as a support for worship, providing musical assistance to a cantor during presentational compositions and leadership to a congregation during its musical participation. Moreover, when new musical settings are introduced at services, whether for listening or to elicit congregational involvement, much less effort is needed if a choir is present. The choristers themselves will grow to appreciate their important role in guiding congregational involvement through the inspiration of their singing. Occasional study of prayer texts with a rabbi or cantor by the choristers will add much to this process.

A well-functioning choir will become a choral instrument that enriches services and congregational events as well as offers choir members an opportunity to enjoy artistic achievement, social involvement and a sense of contribution to their synagogue and community.

The Christian communities of Europe and North America claim fine choral music as their own. Well they should: Churches have built a centuries-old choral tradition that has provided the basis for virtually all Western music, both vocal and orchestral. Now even Asian countries like Japan, China and Korea are striving for good choral sound in the Western tradition. We should be doing no less. A synagogue choir that achieves excellence in tone, balance, diction and, above all, intelligent musicality can inspire admiration for Jewish music in all its listeners and tremendous pride in its own congregants.

Synagogue choirs are essential. They encourage the acquisition of background knowledge, familiarization with synagogue ritual and awareness of Jewish cultures of past centuries, which are part of our people's history and the foundations upon which our present music should be based.

Note: The above section can be used in designing a proposal to a temple board for the formation of a temple choir. See www.urj.org/worship/choral/steinberg.

HOW TO BEGIN

Select the kind of group you are seeking to build: Will it be an adult choir, a teen choir or a multigenerational choir? Even if your congregation is a small one, you may be aiming to have more than one choir. After this has been decided, the process of recruitment begins.

Regarding each of the congregational choirs I have started, it has always been my experience that prospective singers initially respond best to a project rather than to a call for general choir membership. After all, a choir that is in the process of formation has not yet proven itself, and people don't really know what they're being asked to join. Better to plan and announce a specific program, for example, a small cantata, a group of songs with a theme (Israel, Chanukah, Songs of the Shtetl) that is possibly connected to a narrative, a number of songs for a special religious service, etc. Advertise a "package" of rehearsals and a performance with all dates listed. A prospective singer finds it easier to commit to, say, ten rehearsals and a definite performance of preannounced content than to a yearlong membership in an untried group with who-knows-what results. Imagine, just ten rehearsals and someone gets to sing in a performance, perhaps with a well-known guest soloist (a cantor, a local vocalist, an instrumentalist) or even a small instrumental ensemble. A choir director takes a risk in announcing such a program before a choir is even formed, but then there is also an element of risk for the prospective chorister in joining an unknown, unproven group. Take the risk together! This approach offers an opportunity to all for mutual support, mutual effort and, most important, mutual success. The time to discuss further plans and commitments is after the first performance. What a great basis on which to build!

When the response begins (and it may take several rehearsals to bring out the timid ones), voices must be classified into ranges (sopranos, altos, tenors and basses). Many singers will not know which part they should sing and will require help from the director. Stress that all are welcome provided they can sing on tune. Initially at least, individual qualifying auditions may deter people from joining.

CHOOSING A DIRECTOR

The unusual combination of musical skill, leadership quality and Judaic knowledge is essential for the position of director of a temple choir. Ideally this person should also be an organizer, be trained as a conductor, be able to play the piano accurately, have an engaging personality and possess an understanding of Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino. The ability to arrange music also helps.

Although it is almost impossible to find all of these traits in one person, don't despair. Many cantors have developed choral conducting skills that, in combination with their Judaic knowledge, can help them become excellent choir leaders. In congregations without a cantor, even in the smallest communities, there is often someone who combines two or more of the above qualities, preferably the first two, for it is musicianship and leadership that are the basic requirements for any conductor. Everything else is a bonus and can be acquired with help. Any congregational choir director who is not a cantor is strongly encouraged to join the Guild of Temple Musicians, an affiliate of the American Conference of Cantors. The GTM is an organization made up of conductors, soloists, organists, composers, choristers and many others interested in the field of synagogue music. Through its newsletters and professional support, the Guild can be a great asset to a temple choir conductor.

An appreciation of Jewish musical styles is obviously essential, and there is no substitute for a lifetime of exposure to such materials. Yet a well-trained, literate musician with good taste and a desire to learn can develop a love for Jewish music and can be helped by others to understand its words and many of its nuances. Once asked by a student how one becomes a Jewish musician, an experienced synagogue music director replied, "First you become a musician; then you specialize." Not a bad recipe: It works.

WHEN, WHERE AND HOW TO REHEARSE

Although the considerations for this topic are many, the following basic principles apply:

- Routine is the choir director's best friend. Whatever approaches work best for you and your choir should be adopted as routines so that they occur naturally at each rehearsal.
- Rehearsals should be held at least once a week. Separate sectional rehearsals (for sopranos, altos, tenors and basses) are enormously helpful, will raise the level of your choir's performance and will make full choir rehearsals more enjoyable and less boring. Prior to a performance (especially the first one), an extra full rehearsal or two will build confidence.
- Use every aid available, including recording devices, for learning parts at home. In fact, a tape or portable CD recorder can be useful even at rehearsals. Immediate playback will often reveal a problem and its solution much more quickly than words.
- Give your choir every physical advantage. These add up. If you can, choose a rehearsal room with good acoustics, not too "live" (like the shower) or too "dead" (like the closet). Other requirements include cleanliness, neatness, comfortable and supportive chairs, and perhaps a portable bulletin board. Good lighting and ventilation will allow a choir and its director to retain energy throughout the rehearsal. Neat, attractive choir folders will save time at rehearsals, develop respect for printed music and present a uniform appearance in services or at performances.

- Regular attendance is necessary at rehearsals, performances and services. Have attendance taken regularly, and limit the number of absences allowed. Some choirs will not permit singers to participate in a choir program unless they have come to a set number of rehearsals. Consistent attendance is part of every choir member's responsibility.
- Punctuality is important. Observing it will add to the results you achieve, whereas neglecting it will erode those results. Start on time, even if only a few singers are present. Latecomers who encounter a rehearsal already in progress will get the message and arrange to arrive earlier the following week. In any case, your choir should sit facing away from the room's entrance so that latecomers will cause less of a disturbance. End on time, for you owe this to your choristers. Keep the "break" consistent: If you announce ten minutes, the downbeat for the rehearsal's second half should take place ten minutes after the start of the break. I usually play a bright, simple and familiar song on the piano to signal the end of the break, and the choir members sing along as they return to their seats.
- A break is essential. There is a strong social component in a choral group that is well served by an opportunity for members to mingle and make friends. If you as the director also mingle, you will become better acquainted with your choristers, recognize and perhaps assist a few friendless "isolates" and generally help set a friendly and warm atmosphere for your chorus. Coffee and cookies will help, as they do at every Jewish gathering. Choose a time for announcements, perhaps just before the break. Mine are read by our secretary and deal with such matters as letters of appreciation, reports on the welfare of members who are ill, details about sectional rehearsals, announcements of special musical events in the larger community, etc. A chorus is an undemanding social group: One need relate only to the music at first. Yet many a shy singer has won new friends and social acceptance in a choir environment, which he or she could not have done as easily elsewhere. True, our main goal in forming a chorus is a musical one, but what a wondrous and warm human dividend can be ours as well through the bonds created in a positive Jewish environment that encompasses adults young and old.

The rehearsal itself begins with the director's planning. Once the equipment is ready (room, music, tuned piano), the order of the rehearsal should be established. A good routine might consist of (a) warm-up (10 minutes); (b) familiar music (30 minutes); (c) new work (60 minutes); and (d) familiar music (10 minutes). This article does not provide enough space for a detailed discussion of warm-up techniques, but these should be taken seriously as a time to establish tone and precision as well as develop voice production, good pitch, homogeneity of vowel pronunciation, crispness of consonants and balance among the parts, especially during dynamic change. Acquire a good set of scale and chord-based exercises and use some each week.

The main goal of any rehearsal is, of course, a forthcoming choir appearance. The second part of the practice, therefore, should apply your warm-up techniques to the material you have already learned and are preparing to present. Use this period to shape phrases and work on dynamics, diction, accents, entries, cutoffs and all the other elements that bring a piece of music to life and make it sparkle.

Learning a new work is the third part of the rehearsal and will often take the most time. It is essential to "sell" each new piece to your choir. Familiarize the singers with the main character of the prayer response or piece by first investigating its text and then noting how the message is illustrated by the music's form, beauty and effectiveness (if the piece doesn't do these things, try another setting). Especially with nonreaders, work for good tone, diction and phrasing as you go along.

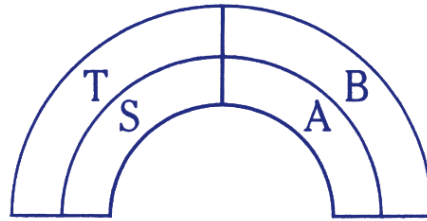
Don't wait until all the parts are learned because singers, particularly those learning "by ear," tend to pick up phrasing and tonal habits quickly at first hearing. Dislodging initial incorrect concepts can be a battle later on.

Bring more to the presentation of a new piece of service music than just the notes on the page. Investigate historical background, translation, the message of the prayer text and the perceived musical goal of the composer or arranger, as well as the mood the piece seeks to evoke. For example, if there is imitation among the parts, make the singers aware of this. The greater the singers' understanding of the work, the better their performance will be.

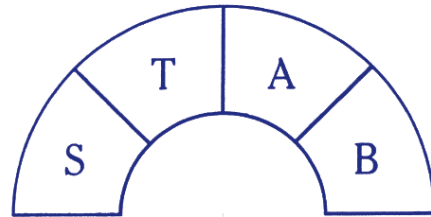
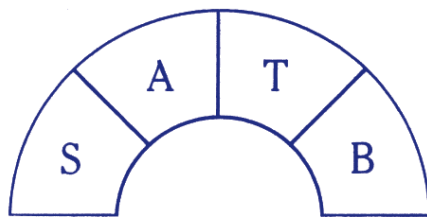
Here are some general hints for the director of a new chorus:

- Choose repertoire that presents a challenge for your better singers but will "teach" quickly, thus building confidence. If the capabilities of your singers are vastly different, a smaller group such as a quartet or chamber ensemble could prepare an extra piece or a more complex section within a larger piece.
- While a cantor will sing most of the solos during a service, there are also places for choristers' solos, duets, etc. Encourage these: They can add both interest and delight.
- Vary styles and tempi of pieces during a rehearsal. Try changing the key of a familiar piece, or try rehearsing it unaccompanied (or accompanied, if it is normally sung a cappella). Rehearse tessitura (high-range) passages an octave lower until the notes are secured. From a chorister's point of view, each rehearsal is like a performance, demanding the same variety and interest that a concert does.
- Members should learn a new piece in sections, completing each part thoroughly before proceeding to the next. An old trick is to introduce the concluding section first so that when the singer arrives to that part, it's like meeting an old friend.
- Keep all parts of the chorus active. If one voice part needs attention, have that voice part sing the words while others hum their own parts. This will highlight the troublesome areas in a specific voice part while keeping others productively involved.
- Occasionally rehearse in a circle or horseshoe so that all can hear the other parts better and develop a sense of "ensemble."
- Insist on discipline, and keep insisting on it. Rehearsing a talkative, inattentive choir is next to impossible. Give an instruction only once. Make 'em listen!
- Work toward memory. Get the singers' faces out of the music books and get their eyes focused on following the conductor. Make 'em look!
- Enjoy yourself. Your choir will, too!

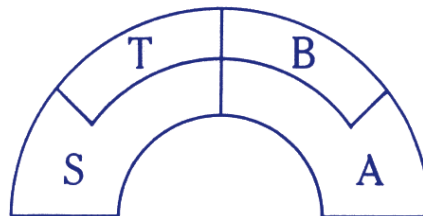
SUGGESTIONS FOR SEATING PLANS



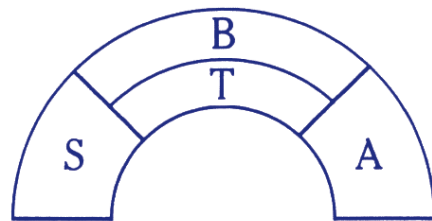
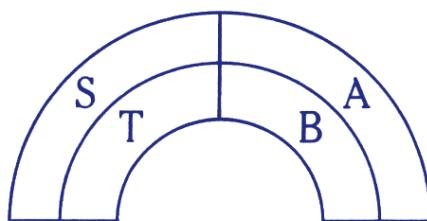
Well-balanced Choirs



Two arrangements where weak basses are brought forward



Weaker female voices



Two arrangements for choirs with weaker male voices

The positioning of a choir during services will, of course, be subject to the architecture of the sanctuary. Generally, a choir should not be hidden but should be perceived as a participant in the worship experience. Ideally, the singers should be placed at the side of the bimah, where they can be seen. They should be encouraged to actively participate in worship: They are a part of the congregation. Occasionally distributing the choristers throughout the congregation to help teach new participative music can be very effective in encouraging worshipers to sing with full voices and with understanding.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHORUS

While occasional two- or three-part choral pieces can prove valuable, it is important that the basic musical structure of any choir includes the standard four parts: soprano, alto, tenor and bass. Most choral music is organized this way. It is the basis of Western harmony, the foundation of practically all choral and orchestral writing and the common musical language of choruses worldwide. Aim to implement four-part singing as quickly as possible. A choir must learn to sing four-part arrangements in order to gain access to any standard library of Jewish music. That said, there are gradations of difficulty in standard SATB arrangements. Start with simpler materials and expand slowly as the choir's ability improves. All of us engaged in synagogue music must encourage new development of simpler materials for beginning choirs that include settings for unison singing, two- and three-part arrangements, rounds, ground bass settings and pieces with recurring choruses that alternate with a cantor's solos, etc.

The main business of a choir is to sing. Nonetheless, the proper attention to administrative details cannot be underestimated. Implementing various organizational ideas will help make rehearsals hum along much more smoothly. Here are a few suggestions for administrative officers, who can be selected from within the choir:

- A *secretary*, who is appointed or elected, can handle correspondence, send get-well cards to ailing members and arrange a telephone committee for quick personal contact with members (about last-minute schedule changes, etc.).
- A *librarian* will make certain that music is properly cataloged, distributed and collected, thus saving the group much time during rehearsals and the cost of lost music. A rolling storage cart, which is stored in the temple during the week and can be easily brought to the rehearsal room, is a great advantage.
- A *social convener* will deal with social events during the year and perhaps arrange for coffee during rehearsal breaks, for rotating pastry donors, etc.
- The three aforementioned officers can form an *executive* that periodically meets with the director to assist in planning, acts as a sounding board and makes rehearsals and programs run smoothly.
- If the choir is large enough, *section leaders* are particularly valuable. They can convene sectional rehearsals, play a role in the distribution and collection of music and other equipment, help with making phone calls and generally act as leaders whenever it is easier to deal with a smaller group as opposed to the entire choir.
- A *public relations representative* can help. Events must be promoted through articles in congregational bulletins or local newspapers, flyers, posters, etc. Follow-up items and critical press reviews are also important.

FUNDING SOURCES AND A CONGREGATION'S RESPONSIBILITY

Essentially, a temple choir should be funded by its congregation. Additional support may also be sought through endowments or other sources.

At the very least, every choir's expenses include the payment of the director and the purchase of music. Many choirs also pay an accompanist. Some temples provide uniform dress for their singers.

There are weekly refreshments, periodic social events, mailing costs, concert promotions, occasional group transportation costs, etc. In addition to congregational support, the following are possible sources for further funding:

- The purchase of music and uniform clothing by the choir members themselves
- Concert ticket sales
- Selling advertising in printed concert programs
- Typical fund-raising activities (raffles, walkathons, etc.)
- Establishing a choir fund that encourages appreciative congregants to make donations

The majority of appearances by a congregational choir will take place at religious services, where applause is not usually permitted. Thus a congregation must explore other ways of showing appreciation to a group of dedicated members who make a significant contribution to temple life. Consider the following:

- Having the rabbi or president extend thanks and recognition to the choir at the close of a service or at an event in which the choir has participated
- Hosting an annual choir party and including expressions of gratitude from the temple and clergy leadership
- Featuring a choir picture, including the names of choir members, in the temple bulletin or an event's printed program
- Providing congregational assistance for funding a choir recording
- Encouraging congregational assistance for funding an annual choir "retreat," a period away from the temple in a relaxed, recreational setting that can include master classes with a guest choral clinician, preparation of new repertoire and rabbi-led studies of prayer texts that are included in the choir's repertoire

WHAT TO SING

This is unquestionably one of the most difficult issues facing temple choirs since the available library of synagogue music is relatively small. The advent of readily accessible photocopying together with a tendency toward short-term expediency on the part of many music professionals have critically damaged the Jewish music publishing industry as a financially viable service. In short, because the distribution of Jewish music generates so little financial return for publishers and composers (not to mention copyists, office support staff, etc.), few investor-publishers exist, and few young, trained composers are entering the field. Thus our repertoire choices for worthwhile music are severely limited.

Meanwhile, there are some good, if limited, possibilities for the collection of repertoire, as indicated in the list below, which begins with the music publishing arm of the Union for Reform Judaism, Transcontinental Music Publications, the largest publisher of Jewish choral music outside Israel.

Transcontinental Music Publications

New Jewish Music Press

URJ Press

633 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017
Toll Free: 800.455.5223
Phone: 212.650.4101
Fax: 212.650.4109
Email: tmp@urj.org

Israel Music Associates P.R.M., Ltd.

49/1 Meir Naqar Street
Jerusalem 93803, Israel
Phone: 972.(0)2.673.2542
Fax: 972.(0)2.673.9052
Email: ima@actcom.co.il

Israel Music Institute (IMI)

Beth Merkazim

55 Menachem Begin Road
P.O. Box 51197
Tel Aviv 67138, Israel
Phone : 972.(0)3.624.7095
Fax: 972.(0)3.561.2826
Email: musicinst@bezeqint.net

Jewishmusic.com

Tara Publications

P.O. Box 707
Owings Mills, MD 21117
Phone: 410.654.0880
Fax: 410.654.0881
Email: webmaster@jewishmusic.com

MODAN Publishing House

Meshek 33
Ben Shemen 73115, Israel
Phone: 972.(0)8.925.3067
Fax: 972.(0)8.920.4797
Email: alon@modan.co.il

OR-TAV Music Publications

P.O. Box 1126
Kfar Sava 44110, Israel
Phone: 972.(0)9.767.9869
Fax: 972.(0)9.766.2855
Email: email@ortav.com

Do not compromise when choosing repertoire. In fairness to choir singers and congregants alike, aim for the greatest and most inspiring music you can find. Even simple music can achieve these qualities if it is intelligently written. Make certain that all the musical settings you select, whether they are presentational or participative, relate to and illustrate their texts. Set your sights high, and avoid “lowest common denominator,” amateurishly written sing-along settings, that are sometimes offered as choral music but hardly deserve that designation. With training and motivation, your choir will rise to the challenge and be thrilled by the results.

Ask other temple choral conductors for suggestions. Those who have faced the problem of programming with a beginning choir will know of appropriate pieces that “teach” easily and sound good. Do not hesitate to contact composers of Jewish music to discuss the works they have written for various choirs, events or specific texts.

Remember that it is ultimately to our advantage to support publishers of Jewish music by buying, not illegally copying, their publications. Not only is this required by law, but only in this way can we encourage full and proper distribution of Jewish choral materials.

The publications available from the music sources listed above do not begin to reflect the enormous quantities of music found in choral libraries that are available to school and church choirs. With effort, ingenuity and a bit of funding support, your congregation can start to build a Jewish music library for even the smallest and least experienced chorus.

PERFORMANCES

A choir is by definition a performing group: Only if it performs regularly will it survive. At first, any public appearance constitutes a performance. I remember presenting a small group of teenagers to an audience just four weeks after the group’s first rehearsal. We sang one duet, two solos and one unison piece with a “descant” melody and spent the remaining time leading everyone in a sing-along of familiar songs. The group’s next performance was several months later and it was, to the pride of every member, considerably more ambitious.

Initially, aim to have the choir appear at routine services for Sabbaths and holidays; then include the choir at the congregation’s special events. To provide activity during quiet periods, schedule choir appearances in the wider local community, for example, in senior citizen residences, hospitals and other synagogues. Performing such mitzvot will give your singers pleasure and earn gratitude from their listeners.

Also, give your group every advantage, including a visual one. Have singers dress uniformly, and work on dignified entrances and exits. Give them notice of performing dates well ahead of time. Wherever possible, list all the members’ names on the printed programs.

Consider the following among possible programming devices:

- Workshops in voice production with professional singers
- Skill-building sessions in sight-reading, simple music theory and Hebrew pronunciation
- Exchanges with other choirs
- Participating in regional choirs that move between communities
- Performing with a small instrumental ensemble or an instrumental obbligato

- Commissioning a new piece written especially for your group
- Featuring guest soloists at performances

Some cities have organized annual *zim'riyot*, bringing together all the Jewish choirs in their community: Each choir presents a brief program and then joins in a massed choir performance of a preselected piece. An option is to have the massed choir selection be a new composition commissioned especially for the occasion. Conductors will develop many more such ideas as the choir progresses; the singers themselves will undoubtedly suggest other ideas.

THE CHOIR'S CONTRIBUTION

The powerful language that is music can be a superbly effective expression of worship, offering singers and congregants alike moments of exquisite beauty, periodic opportunities for joyous participation in song and the essential preservation of our treasured prayer modes and other musical traditions. In addition, the “experiences in learning” that are created by good compositions and renditions that explore depths and layers of meaning in our prayer texts open windows of understanding for all. Given skilled leadership and sufficient congregational support, a synagogue choir can bring these glorious dimensions to your congregation.

This article is based on one written by the author in 1988, which was published by the National Jewish Welfare Board under the title “One People, One Voice.” It was rewritten at the request of the then Joint Commission on Synagogue Music and incorporates suggestions from the Commission’s members.

***Ben Steinberg** (1930–) was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, and educated at Toronto’s Royal Conservatory of Music and the University of Toronto. Well known throughout Canada and the United States for his lecture-recitals on Jewish music history, Dr. Steinberg has also conducted and lectured overseas in such places as Hong Kong, Australia and Japan. Synagogues and other diverse groups have commissioned his compositions, and most of them have been published in the United States, Canada and Israel. They include Sabbath services, choral settings, instrumental and vocal chamber music and solo works. In addition to his published music, Ben Steinberg is the author of two books about adult and youth choirs and is a contributor to the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada. His honors include the 1983 Kavod Award from the Cantors Assembly (Conservative), the 1990 Guild of Temple Musicians’ Shomer Shira Award, a composer’s award from the American Harp Society in 1983 and an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in 1998.*

Dr. Steinberg has twice been honored by the city of Jerusalem, which invited him to be an artist-in-residence at its creative retreat, where he researched and wrote his cantata Echoes of Children, the 1979 International Gabriel Award winner. He is the founding chairman of two unique annual competitions that encourage young musicians to compose and perform: the Ben Steinberg Musical Legacy Award and the Guild of Temple Musicians’ Young Composer’s Award. Dr. Steinberg is the director emeritus of music and composer-in-residence at Temple Sinai in Toronto, Ontario, and currently serves as the copresident of the Guild of Temple Musicians.