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Simple Gifts, Complex Spirituality

[The Jewish head of the Boston Camerata collaborates with an acclaimed Finnish choreographer to shine a light on Shaker worship.](#)



*Boston Camerata's Joel Cohen:
Moved by the Shaker theology,
particularly the belief that there can
be a holy spirit in any person, that
"anyone can work toward it."*

by Caroline Lagnado
Special To The Jewish Week

Tero Saarinen, the acclaimed Finnish dancer and choreographer, was browsing the remainders counter at a record store in France one day in the mid-1990s. Among the sale items, he came across an American CD of Shaker music called "Simple Gifts," and bought it, already interested in the sect from having seen Doris Humphrey's famous Shaker-inspired choreography.

Seeing that the Boston Camerata recorded the CD, he sent Joel Cohen, its director, an e-mail in 2003 expressing his interest in the music. That summer, the two award-winning artists began their joint collaboration of music and dance, "Borrowed Light," which will be performed beginning on Nov. 7 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

Cohen, 65, is not your typical producer of Shaker music. Considering himself a humanist Jew, inspired by Jewish traditions, Cohen observes Shabbat and celebrates Passover with seders. His job as leader of an early music group frequently exposes him to other religions and traditions; the Boston Camerata often performs non-Jewish music, much of it ecclesiastical Christian.

While working with these pieces, "I have to put aside my personal beliefs," Cohen said in a phone interview with The Jewish Week recently. Christian music is "wonderful art," he remarked, "full of spirituality. I just don't feel particularly drawn to Christmas music."

As a Jew, Cohen felt comfortable working with the Shakers, who welcomed him, and helped him with his research. "They drive, like music, even a good glass of wine," Cohen said. "They are very relaxed and open minded — they had even heard the Camerata."

To prepare for his work on the Shaker CDs, Cohen researched extensively at the Shaker



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library of Sabbathday Lake in New Gloucester, Maine, and was given recordings of their songs. He found Shaker theology interesting, particularly the belief that there can be a holy spirit in any person, that "anyone can work toward it," he remarked. Cohen also admires the Shaker's stance on equality. Historically, "they have been opposed to racial injustices in America, and see men and women as equals," Cohen observed.

Though the Shakers keep a low profile, and practice a lifestyle of simplicity, pacifism, hard work, gender segregation, and celibacy, they have attracted a number of converts throughout the years and have managed to sustain themselves.

It seems as though the sect may currently be in crisis: today there are only four Shakers remaining, all living at Sabbathday Lake. This Shaker village was founded in 1783, and it is the only Shaker village still functioning. Despite a seemingly austere life of work and prayer, the Shakers remain of this world — they have made important contributions to American design and architecture, they maintain a Web site, a museum, and a library and they encourage outside visitors.

Cohen's interest in early American music, particularly that of the Shakers, began when he was a music composition student at Harvard. "My professor brought in early American music because it broke the rules of harmonization," Cohen remembered. After having recorded a number of early American CDs, the Camerata produced "Simple Gifts" in 1995.

Shaker music is entirely vocal, using simple means to convey deep faith and spirituality. Cohen sees it almost as America's version of Gregorian chant, except with powerful dance rhythms adding to the Shakers' expression of spirituality. In "Borrowed Light," the Camerata, comprised of four women and four men, stand on stage with Saarinen's dancers and sing the old, haunting chants Cohen transcribed at Sabbathday Lake. They don't dance while singing, but they were directed by Saarinen to move, and they are dressed in severe black costumes similar to those worn by the dancers. Saarinen's goal in staging the singing and dancing groups together was to give the semblance of real community.

Saarinen, who is 43 and based in Helsinki, has an international approach to his work. Combining ballet, contemporary dance, and butoh, a post-World War II form of Japanese dancing, his choreography features what he calls "refined grotesqueness of movement and clarity of texture." He has studied in Japan, and worked with many foreign groups, including the Lyon Opera Ballet in France, and the Israeli Batsheva Dance Company.

"Borrowed Light" isn't a performance of Shaker dance, though it does borrow some elements of Shaker dance like spinning, stomping, and clapping, and Saarinen weaves them into his own dance aesthetic. Singing and dancing, seen as enhancements of Jewish worship, are major elements of Shaker religious practice. They are seen as a form of labor for God, and according to the Sabbathday Lake Web site, the Shakers attained their name "because of their ecstatic and violent bodily agitation in worship."

When asked if he sees any similarities between Shaker music and Jewish music, Cohen said that the two are almost impossible to compare because of the breadth of genres within Jewish music. He does see Jewish music from Morocco as "ecstatic and mystical like Shaker music."

Cohen and the Camerata have also looked to spirituality within Jewish music in their work. "Since I am a Jew, everything I do, I do Jewishly. Even when I am performing Shaker music, I am still a Jew performing Shaker music," Cohen said.

No strangers to new cultures and collaborations, the Camerata joined forces with Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble for "A Mediterranean Christmas," which features a shofar, as well as a Sephardic Hebrew song translated into Spanish. The Camerata also produced "Musique Judeo-Baroque," a CD of Baroque Jewish music sung in Hebrew, and "Chants de l'Exil - Songs from Jewish Musicians in Exile."

Cohen's emerging side project, the Camerata Mediterranea, has performed with Sharq and the Andalou Orchestra of Morocco, exploring, in part, medieval Jewish music in Spain. Cohen is active in religious dialogue through music, as he continues to promote "The Sacred Bridge," a CD of Jewish and Christian music from medieval Spain that traces some of the ways Jews and Christians related and depended on each other through music and poetry in medieval Europe.

Cohen, who has been musical director of the Camarata since 1968, is eyeing

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semi-retirement next year. He will spend more time in Europe developing the Camerata Mediterranea, which he envisions to be an international cultural dialogue and conference project to explore the relationship and shared influences among Arab, Jewish and Christian musical repertoires.

Until then, Cohen and the Camerata are keeping a busy schedule. They are in residency now at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville for the fall semester; they will be touring with Christmas shows in the U.S. and France, and then presenting "Tristan & Iseult" in early 2008. At the moment, Cohen is focusing on "Borrowed Light," a Jewish conductor collaborating with a Finnish choreographer to tease out the mystical spirituality of the Shakers.

"Borrowed Light" will be performed at BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, at 30 Lafayette Ave, Brooklyn. It will run Nov. 7 at 7 p.m., and Nov. 8-10 at 7:30 p.m., and tickets are \$20, \$35, and \$45.

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