

The Chassidic Nigun

In eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, the Chassidic movement of Judaism arose from a desire to prioritize mysticism over dogma. Out of this tradition came the *nigun*, or a song without words, designed to link the rabbinical elite with the ordinary person. The singers could attain greater spiritual heights in prayer because the singing was unencumbered by text. Everyone, from the revered Jewish scholar to the lowliest peasant, could feel free to sing a *nigun*, to embrace individual spirituality, and to embellish with improvisation. These *nigunim* became popular internationally for use on any occasion—sacred or secular, celebratory or solemn. The melodies have become like folk tunes, adaptable to different tempi, syllables, voice types, or genres of music.

This arrangement first introduces a traditional *nigun* in unison with understated harmonic support. It slowly builds into a fiery frenzy: the choir sings in as quick a tempo as possible, anchoring floating descants that are designed to sound improvisatory on top of crazed, whirling, driving rhythms. This arrangement is meant to evoke the passion, the freedom, and the beauty of Jewish song in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe.

A Note on Performance

The syllables printed here—“nai” (pronounced like “night”) and “dai di di dai” (as in “dye ditty dye”)—are merely suggestions; the conductor may prefer to use different consonants (such as “lai” or “tai”), or alternative syllables altogether such as *bim bam*. The conductor may also choose to add snaps or claps, and should feel free to adapt the spoken exclamations (“hey, hey!”) to suit the particular ensemble, venue, and occasion.