A tool of remembrance: the shofar in modern music, literature and art
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1. Introduction
1.1. Research Questions and Methodological Concepts

The shofar, like the menorah and the Star of David, is a central symbol of Judaism. In the Hebrew Bible, it is the most mentioned instrument: it announces the revelation of the Ten Commandments, it calls for religious rituals, it is heard in the exhortations of prophets and it gives the signal for battle. In the Bible, however, the shofar is only rarely a musical instrument. In the High Holy Day prayer books, it is prominently present and Rosh Ha-Shanah is even called Yom Teruʿah, the “Day of shofar blowing;” in this day’s service, the shofar produces a wordless continuation of prayer, and therefore is considered a ritual instrument instead of a musical instrument. “If its sound is thin, thick or dry, it is valid, since all sounds emitted by a shofar can pass muster,” states the Talmud dryly. By the end of the 19th century, writers, composers and artists changed their way of looking at the shofar and thanks to their work, the venerable ram’s horn was given a second youth; it made an artistic turn to music, literature and art, revealing its unexpected artistic abilities, without forgetting its religious past.

The purpose of this study is to explore the use and meanings of the shofar as a traditional religious symbol in the new, secular context of modern music, literature and art, where the instrument is no longer subject to restrictions of place (the synagogue), time (the liturgical year) and authority (halakhah), and where it is directed to general, not exclusively Jewish audiences of listeners, readers or viewers, who are not aroused to action or repentance, but invited to experience the artists’ personal interpretations of Jewish traditions.

The shofar has been given relatively little attention in the fields of musicology, art history, literary studies, linguistics and Jewish studies, and no scholarly monographs have been written on the instrument. Important publications on historical, religious and aesthetic aspects of the shofar can be counted on the fingers of two hands. The instrument is treated in three monographs about music in Ancient Israel: Alfred Sendrey’s *Music in Ancient Israel* (1969); Jeremy Montagu’s *Musical Instruments of the Bible* (2002); and Joachim Braun’s *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine* (2002); whereas the first two authors conduct mainly textual analysis, Braun bases his book chiefly on archaeological research. Three important studies are Corinna Körting’s book *Der Schall des Schofar* (1999) with a few short chapters about the origins of shofar blowing; the chapter “The Shofar” in Volume IV of Richard Goodenough’s *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (1954); and David Wulstan’s article “The Sounding of the Shofar” (1973) with a historical analysis of the traditional shofar blasts. The following three liturgical handbooks contain comprehensive and profound chapters about the shofar: *The High Holy Days* (1959/2004) by Hayyim Herman Kieval; *Justice and Mercy* (1963) by Max Arzt; and *Hilkhot Moʾadim: Understanding the Laws of the Festivals* (2013) by David Brofsky. The last of the ten is Michael Chusid’s *Hearing Shofar* (2009-2018), a spiritual and practical online handbook with a constantly expanding compilation of textual and pictorial materials. The most comprehensive essay written on the instrument, “Das Schofar” (1919, preface by Sigmund Freud) by the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, is a thrilling read, but a speculative rather than a scholarly

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1 Talmud Rosh Ha-Shanah 27b.
work.²

A status quaestionis on the shofar in modern music, literature and art does in fact not exist and the only initial impetus to research in this area has been given by the musicologist Malcolm Miller, who devotes ten pages of his article “The Shofar and its Symbolism” (2002) to the shofar in 20th-century music. Miller emphasizes the shofar’s “ability to generate aesthetic experience;” he lists 24 compositions from the 20th century and discusses two works by Edward Elgar and Alexander Goehr.³

A Tool of Remembrance deals with the shofar in the dialogue between modern art and traditional Jewish religious texts, especially the Hebrew Bible and the prayer books for the High Holy Days Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. For a better understanding of the dialogue between traditional texts and works of art and for a workable terminology, methodological concepts of the Russian philosopher and literary theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) are brought in, particularly concepts which are usable in music and art as well as in literature.

In Bakhtin’s terminology a shofar blast, a biblical story, a prayer or a work of art with a shofar is an “utterance,” whose beginning and end are determined by a change of speakers, because an utterance is the response to the previous utterance and the anticipation of the following one. Such a reaction is not necessarily verbal and it can be any form of responsive understanding. An utterance finds the object to which it refers “overlaid with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value.”⁴ The series of shofar blasts in the Rosh Ha-Shanah service, for example, are not monologues but rather links in a complicated dialogue. The first twelve blasts are preceded by psalm verses, a prayer for the shofar blower, a warning to Satan the Adversary, an expression of joy over the commandments, in particular that of listening to the shofar, a number of blessings and the outspoken hope that the shofar will arouse God’s mercy.⁵ Here, the shofar blasts are utterances in a dialogue with the congregation and a dialogue with God, reaching from the theophany in Exodus to the contemporary prayer book.

Every utterance of a shofar blower, cantor, rabbi, composer, writer or artist is addressed to a second person near or far, concrete or abstract, whom Bakhtin calls the “addressee.” The addressee of an artist can be a Jewish or non-Jewish, religiously-oriented or secular audience or readership. While the “speaker” focuses on the addressee, he assumes the existence of a third party, the “superaddressee,” who is located in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time, “and whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed.”⁶ The superaddressee of the artist can be the God of Judaism,

² This is demonstrated in a commentary by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1996): “Reik links the sound of the shofar to the Freudian problematic of the primordial crime of parricide (from Totem and Taboo): he interprets the horrifying turgid and leaden drone of the shofar, which evokes an uncanny mixture of pain and enjoyment, as the last vestige of the primordial father’s life-substance, as the endlessly prolonged scream of the suffering-dying-impotent-humiliated father.” (Žižek, “The Shofar” 150).
³ A Tool of Remembrance discusses 5 of these 24 works, namely those of Elgar (Chapter 4.5), Goehr (4.43), Braun (4.44), Curran (4.47) and Ran (4.57).
⁵ The Koren Rosh HaShana Mahzor 492-6.
⁶ Bakhtin, “The Problem of the Text” 126.
the God of Christianity, a pre-biblical deity, Zionism, Humanity or the artist’s conscience. The tendency of a work of art may be either particularist with the Jewish people as a superaddressee or universalist with humanity as a superaddressee.

In the Bible, the shofar is the instrument used by God, a prophet, priest, king or commander to call for recognition or obedience, while the shofar blasts in the synagogue, as notated in the prayer books for the High Holy Days, call for unconditional devotion to God. Therefore, Bakhtin’s concept of “authoritative discourse” applies to the shofar calls in these traditional religious texts. Artists, however, have no authority in this sense, but rather persuasiveness, when they carry their audiences with them into the imaginary world they have built around the shofar. Their utterances are, in Bakhtin’s terminology, “internally persuasive discourse.” In the work of art, both the traditional religious text and the voice of the artist are heard and the discourse is half the speaker’s and half another person’s. “Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition,” states Bakhtin, adding that the internally persuasive discourse is always applied to new material, under new conditions and in a new context. In this way, interaction is created with other internally persuasive discourses, for example, in a song based on a poem about the shofar.

The processing of traditional texts about the shofar, traditional shofar blasts or traditional representations of shofar blowing turns the modern works of art into utterances with a “double-voiced discourse,” in which voices speak in different languages, sociolects or styles and with different worldviews from different periods. For research on the assimilation of traditional texts, Bakhtin provides three useful concepts: “hybridization,” “stylization,” and “parodic stylization.” Hybridization is the mixing in one single utterance of two social languages or two linguistic consciousnesses from different periods or social environments. An example of hybridization is the combination of traditional shofar blasts and modern electronic sounds. In stylization, two linguistic consciousnesses are present as well, but not on an equal footing. The stylizer’s discourse uses the other’s language and style as raw material and creates an image of it; the former represents and the latter is represented. The stylizer must make sure that his use of another’s language is consistent. An example of stylization is the incorporation of the archaic shofar in a modern symphony orchestra. In parodic stylization, something similar happens, but there, the intentions of the representing discourse conflict with those of the represented discourse: “they fight against them, they depict a real world of objects not by using the represented language as a productive point of view, but rather by using it as an exposé to destroy the represented language.” In order to create an authentic and productive image of the other’s language, the stylizer has to leave its internal logic intact. An example of parodic stylization is the quasi-endless repetition of a syllable by a singer, as an imitation of the tone repetition in shofar blasts, meant to ridicule religious Jews.

In the Bible, the shofar is blown at times and places determined by God’s will, a ritual,

7 Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” 345. The Russian slovo can mean “word,” “story,” or “discourse.”
8 Ibid. 364.
an emergency situation or the course of a military campaign; well-known examples are the theophany at Mount Sinai, Temple rituals in Jerusalem, and the conquest of Jericho. In the High Holy Day prayer books, the shofar contributes to the celebration of Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur in the synagogue. In the arts, Bakhtin labels such special, intrinsic connections of place and time “chronotopes.” “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible,” he states, “likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.”

A Tool of Remembrance discusses “the shofar”—a collective term for a real ram’s horn, instruments representing a shofar, shofar blasts, allusions to shofar blasts, images or descriptions of shofarot or shofar blowers—in 70 works of music, literature and art from the late 19th century until the early 21st century. The approach is synchronistic and no attempt has been made to research the historical origins and development of the shofar concept in music, literature and art; instead, only a number of products, works of art, are discussed. The number of 70 (30+30+10) works is both symbolic and based on research. In the approximately 300 works collected, the ratio between music, literature and art appeared to be 3:3:1, the same as the ratio between the 30+30+10 “standing” blasts in the Rosh Ha-Shanah service. In Jewish tradition, the iconic number 70, product of the sacred numbers 7 and 10, is used to indicate completeness; according to a midrash, “There are seventy faces to the Torah, turn it around and around, for everything is in it[,]” and Rashi, the most important medieval commentator on the Bible, stated that Moses explained the Law in seventy languages.

In A Tool of Remembrance, the shofar in the Bible and in the prayer books for the High Holy Days will be discussed in Part I, in the light of John Searle’s speech act theory. An overview of the shofar in the dialogue between these traditional religious texts and the works of art will be presented in Part II. The works of art themselves will be discussed in Part III. The dialogue on the one hand between the Bible and—as representatives of synagogue service—the prayer books, and on the other hand the works of art can assume different forms; composers either use a real shofar or refer to the sound of the instrument or to the system of 100 shofar blasts from the liturgy; writers refer to shofar stories or shofar prayers, they describe the sound of the shofar or imitate it by an onomatopoeia. Visual artists picture shofar blowers, use texts or give the system of shofar blasts a non-figurative form. Dialogues between the arts are being created, when composers use literary texts about the shofar. Dialogue becomes a polemic, when artists criticize or parody traditional religious texts, or when they ignore the traditional prohibition of images or the halakhic laws regarding the shofar.

The artists discussed—religious Jews, secular Jews, and Christians; Europeans, Americans, and Israelis—have diverse backgrounds and connect their own, topical questions to the traditional religious texts. Bakhtin labels this attitude “creative understanding” and notes that without his “own questions” one cannot creatively understand anything other

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9 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope” 84.
10 Cf. Chapter 3.3.
12 Rashi, commentary on Deut. 1:5.
or foreign, and according to him, a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not necessarily result in a mixture of the two, because each culture can retain its own identity while both are enriched by the encounter.\textsuperscript{13}

The poet and essayist Thomas Stearns Eliot stated in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) that “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”\textsuperscript{14} Eliot added that he meant this as an aesthetic and not merely historical principle. An important research question in \textit{A Tool of Remembrance} thus concerns the point of departure of the modern artist in his dialogue with the traditional religious texts about the shofar. There are three possibilities, whose formulation was inspired by Eliot’s above-mentioned article.

1. The artist’s point of departure is a traditional religious text on the shofar, the system of shofar blasts or the shofar blasts themselves, in which he finds inspiration for a modern work of art. In Eliot’s words, “the Present is directed by the Past.”\textsuperscript{15}

2. The artist’s point of departure is another work of art, which may be inspired by traditional religious texts. To paraphrase Eliot: “the Present is indirectly directed by the Past.”

3. The artist’s point of departure is an “own question” of an artistic, psychological, social or political nature; the artist finds an example, illustration, analogy, contrast or comfort in a traditional religious text, which becomes a “usable Past.”\textsuperscript{16} Even if this does not alter anything in the traditional text, this text will be read differently after the creation of the new work of art. In the words of Eliot: “the Past is altered by the Present.”

The selection of the corpus of 70 works of music, literature and art to which Bakhtin’s and Eliot’s concepts will be applied, is discussed in Chapter 1.2.

\textsuperscript{13} Bakhtin, “Response to a Question” 7.
\textsuperscript{14} Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 4.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 5.
\textsuperscript{16} A term coined by the literary historian Robert Van Wyck Brooks in “On Creating a Usable Past” (1918).
1.2. Selection of the Corpus

Around 300 works of music, literature and art about or with the shofar were found in libraries, particularly the main library and the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana of the University of Amsterdam; in museums, especially the Jewish Historical Museum and the Biblical Museum in Amsterdam, and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; and on the Internet. From this collection, a corpus of 70 works was selected, following six criteria.

1. The works should originate from the period of the late 19th century to the early 21st century, or more precisely, the period 1894-2010. The shofar emerged in modern art well before the 1890s, for example in Mendele Moykher Sforim’s novels Dos kleyne menshele (“The Little Man,” 1864), and Dos vintshfingerl (“The Wishing-Ring,” 1865); George MacFarren’s oratorio St. John the Baptist (1873), and Shimen Frug’s poem Dray khaveyrim (“Three Friends,” 1886), but a critical mass in music, literature and art was only reached at the end of the 19th century. The year 2010 has only been chosen for practical reasons.

2. Preference was given to art which goes beyond mere reproduction or confirmation of traditional religious texts, art with a surprising or even controversial use of the shofar. For example, Boris Schatz’s bronze relief Sounding the Shofar (1914) of a prophet-like shofar blower reveals great skill, but does not raise many questions, whereas Yoysef Tshaykov’s drawing Dawn (1919) of a shofar blower who is half a traditional Jew with peyes and half a modern, clean-shaven Jew, pictured against the background of a stylized Torah scroll with the slogan “Proletarians of All Countries, Unite!” is more surprising and controversial. In most works the shofar could easily be identified, though in some cases the context was decisive or more research was necessary, as the following four examples may show.

In Arnold Schoenberg’s opera Moses und Aron (1932), the French horns blow a powerful blast, very unlike a traditional shofar blast; however, it is heard when Moses descends from Mount Sinai and discovers the golden calf, and alludes to God’s great shofar and the giving of the Ten Commandments with the prohibition of images, the subject of the opera.

In Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 2 (1888-1894), the Finale is announced by trumpet blasts, which are sometimes interpreted as shofar blasts;¹⁷ however, considering the context with the organ, the Gregorian Dies Irae, Klopstock’s Christian poem, and Mahler’s commentary,¹⁸ they rather belong to the composer’s idiosyncratic mixture of Christian concepts and the philosophy of Gustav Fechner.

The artist Lucienne Bloch pictured a large animal horn in her murals The Evolution of Music (1938) in a New York school; though both the New York City Department of Education¹⁹ and Sita Milchev, the artist’s daughter,²⁰ stated that the horn is a shofar, it looks like an elephant tusk and is pictured in an African, non-Jewish context.

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¹⁸ “The Last Trump sounds; the graves spring open . . . Now they come marching along in a mighty procession: beggars and rich men, common folk and kings, the Church Militant, the Popes.” In Mitchell and Nicholson, The Mahler Companion 123.
¹⁹ New York City Department of Education, Public Art for Public Schools.
²⁰ Milchev, e-mail to the author, April 9, 2010.
Over 200,000 websites, including the Wikipedia article “Shofar,” mention a shofar in Jerry Goldsmith’s soundtrack to the science-fiction horror film Alien (1979) by Ridley Scott; the score, however, revealed that the hair-raising blasts were not produced by a ram’s horn but by a conch shell.

3. The Jewish identity of an artist or a work was not used as a criterion. Renowned scholars have ventured a definition of Jewish art, and two examples by musicologists may be quoted here.

The first, which has been qualified as a workable definition by the Encyclopaedia Judaica, was formulated by Curt Sachs and presented at the First International Congress of Jewish Music in Paris (1957): “Jewish music is that music which is made by Jews, for Jews, as Jews.”21 A work like Berio’s Shofar22 does not meet this definition, as it was composed by a Gentile as a prelude to a Christian requiem and performed by German and Polish choirs and an Israeli orchestra for a general audience, although it was accepted by the patron as a Jewish composition23 and nobody has objected to that. Moreover, the mere lack of consensus on the question of who is a Jew undermines Sachs’ definition.

A more recent definition of Jewish music is that by Mark Slobin (1995): “the music of an extraordinary mobile, widely dispersed and frequently persecuted ‘people’ who can not easily be defined by ‘homeland,’ ‘race,’ ‘ethnicity,’ ‘nationality,’ or ‘religion.’”24 One argument is enough to falsify this definition: at the end of the 20th century, almost half of the Jewish world population lived in the United States and was perhaps “extraordinary mobile”—which is nothing unusual in the US—but not “widely-dispersed” and certainly not “frequently persecuted.” We have to wait for the invention of the writer Steve Stern: “that one simply plug into a JEW-O-METER—like the old applause-o-meter on the Queen for a Day show—and see how Jewish a writer really is.”25 In the meantime, the point of departure of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp in The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times seems realistic: “Clearly no single definition of ‘Jewish art’ can suffice. For this reason, we take Jewishness as contingent and contextual rather than definitive and presumptive.”26

4. Every work of art should contribute to the thematic diversity of the corpus. Therefore, no more than two works by the same artist were included.

5. The works should be easily accessible and for a longer period of time, so that the reader can form his own opinion of them.

6. Insofar applicable, an English translation should be available. Exceptions were made for Abel Herzberg’s Dutch story De geschiedenis van mijn sjofar (“The History of My Shofar”) with an important role for a personified shofar in the border area between secularism and religiosity, and for Stefan Heucke’s German opera Das Frauenorchester von Auschwitz (“The Women’s Orchestra of Auschwitz”) with the system of 100 shofar blasts as a structure-determining element.

22 Chapter 4.54.
23 Requiem of Reconciliation. CD Booklet 6.
24 Slobin, World of Music, Vol. 11, No. 1 22.