

Stephen Schwartz Comments on the Movie *The Prince of Egypt* - The Songs

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The following questions and answers are from the archive of the StephenSchwartz.com Forum.

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SECTION 1 – SONGS – Background

Prince of Egypt: Subject Matter Influence Music?

Question:

How did the subject matter influence your choice of musical 'style' or 'flavor' for Prince of Egypt? Does it contain any 'middle eastern' type of sound?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The locale and period of PRINCE OF EGYPT absolutely influenced the sound of the music. I wanted to come up with a sound for the songs that was accessible to a contemporary audience but at the same time was redolent of both Egyptian and Hebraic flavors. When I'm working on a score set in a specific place and time, I try to prepare by listening to and playing on the piano a lot of source music; then when I start to write, I don't think about it consciously, but the influence in my unconscious is certainly there. Thus, in the same way that I prepared for writing THE BAKER'S WIFE score by listening to and playing on the piano Debussy, Edith Piaf songs and French folk music, or for my upcoming Disney TV project GEPETTO by listening to and playing Verdi, Rossini, Nino Rota and Italian folk songs, for PRINCE OF EGYPT I used Hebrew folk records, tapes of ancient Egyptian court music, and even pop tapes I picked up in Cairo on a research trip to Egypt. Then, as always, in writing the songs I just concentrated on the characters and the situation, but there's no question that the influences are extremely obvious. When you listen to a song for PRINCE OF EGYPT, you will hear indisputably that it could not have come from any of my other shows or films. I hope that answers your question; thanks for writing. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Question about Research for Prince of Egypt

Question:

Dear Sir, In the Prince of Egypt, how much amount of research did you do for its MUSIC? Although I know a bit of songwriting myself, I'm not so acquainted with how professional songwriters like you work, especially in big projects like this. Do you still go into your quiet rooms (like us mortals!) and come up with the melodies the usual way? What I'm sure is, you don't just sit on the piano and say, "Okey, let's make a great song today!"... Or did you? Thanks a lot. -TREX!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I actually do quite a lot of research, particularly if I am working on a project that is set in another place and/or time. It helps me get specific details and flavor for the lyrics and a sense of the tone of the music. In fact, I sort of have a motto: "In lieu of inspiration, do research." In the case of the music for PRINCE OF EGYPT, I listened to a lot of things: ancient Egyptian court music, Hebraic lullabies, etc. To be honest, none of it was actually very useful, though believe it or not, hearing some contemporary Cairo techno-pop was a little helpful. Unfortunately, it still always comes down to sitting alone in a room, staring at an empty pad or sitting at an impatient piano and trying to come up with something, right? Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 2 – Deliver Us

Prince of Egypt: "Elohim" in "Deliver Us"

Question/Comment about "Elohim"

Answer from Stephen Schwartz: I thought some of you may be interested in this response to a question of why I chose the word "Elohim" in the opening number of The Prince of Egypt - "Deliver Us":

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

...In answer to your question about the PRINCE OF EGYPT lyrics: I wanted an authentic-sounding Hebrew reference to God to help set the time and place. My first choice was "Adonai", but I was told by the religious consultants on the film that it would have been sacrilegious to use that term in that way in those days. So I selected "Elohim" instead, partly because it was slightly archaic, and partly because the scansion of the word fit the music! Thanks for asking; hope you enjoy the movie when you see it. Best wishes, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 3 – Through Heaven's Eyes

Through Heaven's Eyes

Question:

Do you have any interesting memories or things you could share of either the process of writing the lyrics and/or music to Through Heaven's Eyes and/or the process of getting it recorded? And did you choose Brian Stokes Mitchell to play that role or did somebody else?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

"Through Heaven's Eyes" is my favorite of the songs in PRINCE OF EGYPT. It was actually the fourth song I wrote for that spot in the movie! The first three were more comedic and were essentially plot-driven, encompassing Moses' time in Midian. The first was called "All in the Attitude" and was kind of a comic number about how poor they all were, and the next two, called "Don't be a Stranger" and "One of Us", were about welcoming Moses into the tribe. For a while, we were going to go with "One of Us", but as the picture developed, Jeffrey Katzenberg began to feel that we needed something more philosophical and thematic in that spot. As we all began to think about it, one of the directors, Steven Hickner, came in with a poem called "The Measure of a Man", and I based the lyric for the song on the philosophy in the poem. The casting of Stokes was partly at my suggestion, since I knew him a bit, but it was a group decision.

Through Heaven's Eyes

Question from an email - not available

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The song "Through Heaven's Eyes" was the third try I had made at a song for that spot in THE PRINCE OF EGYPT. The first two were more story-driven, dealing with Moses' welcome and acceptance into the Midian tribe. Jeffrey Katzenberg came to feel (correctly, I believe) that the song should be more philosophical and reflect the change in Moses' way of thinking. One of the directors, Steve Hickner, came across a poem: "The Measure of a Man". I forget the author's name, but it is relatively well-known. The ideas contained in that poem, translated into "Midianese", became the basis for the song. Some of the specific images (the "stone on the mountain-top", for instance) were certainly influenced by my trip to the Sinai desert in Egypt. Thanks for your interest. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Regarding the melody of "Through Heaven's Eyes"

Question:

Dear Stephen Schwartz, I am Christopher B., and am currently a student of a high school in Japan. This year, I am writing a musical investigation discussing music from Dreamwork's "The Prince of Egypt"; taking a careful look at the song, "Through Heaven's Eyes". I have found a section of this song's tune to be very similar, if not the same, to a melody in Dvorak's "Symphony no. 9 in E Minor, op. 95 - Largo". Did you use this piece in any way for inspiration? If so, what exactly did you use? I thank you in advance for any response to these questions. Sincerely, Christopher B.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Christopher: Often I am conscious of classical inspirations for some of my songs. But in this case, if I was influenced by Dvorak's famous piece, it was totally unconscious. If you are referring to the bridge (accompanying the lyric "So that's why we share all we have with you ..."), now that you point it out, I do note a melodic and harmonic similarity, though of course rhythmically they are quite different. But those are not uncommon intervals -- in fact, I'm sure I've used them elsewhere. I guess Mr. Dvorak just made them famous! Thanks for the question and for listening so closely and intelligently! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Prince of Egypt – Truly Inspired [Through Heaven's Eyes]

Question:

Dear Stephen, As a fellow musician & composer it is not everyday that songs truly inspire me, make me stop and listen to every note... Your work on the "The Prince Of Egypt" was incredible... melodically, lyrically... Thank you. It is awesome to hear music with such passion and quality glorify God. How were the songs conceived? Best Wishes, Adam DePasquale

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. DePasquale: Thank you very much for your message and enthusiasm for my work in PRINCE OF EGYPT. As always, my approach to the songs was to try to give voice to what the characters were thinking and feeling. The song in which I feel I was most successful at expressing a philosophy that I share with the character is "Through Heaven's Eyes." That was actually the third song written for its spot in the film -- the other two had more to do with the tribe welcoming Moses into their midst. It was Jeffrey Katzenberg's suggestion that the song be more about the philosophy of Jethro, the spiritual leader of the tribe. One of the directors, Steve Hickner, found a well-known poem called "The Measure of a Man" which helped to inspire some of the specific ideas in the song. I'm glad you like my work for the film, and I thank you again for taking the time to write. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 4 – When You Believe

Prince of Egypt: When You Believe Inspiration

Question:

I'd be interested in hearing where your inspiration came from for the words and concept of the song "When You Believe."

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The inspiration for "When You Believe" began on a trip to Egypt with some of the PRINCE OF EGYPT crew. One of the directors, Steve Hickner, and one of the producers, Penney Finkelman-Cox, and I were bouncing around the Sinai in the back of a van, and they were talking about how they would like a song at the end of the movie that was triumphant in feel and summed up the message of perseverance in the face of hopelessness. Steve also mentioned the song "When You Wish Upon a Star" as a kind of model. I thought of the title "When You Believe", and they liked it, and the song sort of grew from there. Thanks for asking. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Prince of Egypt: When You Believe/Hebrew Children

Question:

I've just finished listening to my copy of the "Prince of Egypt" soundtrack for the 13th time, and I'd like everyone to know how much I enjoyed it - especially the instrumental pieces. One question: What inspired the beautiful segment sung by the Hebrew Children in "When You Believe"?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for the message. I should tell you that most of the instrumental compositions on THE PRINCE OF EGYPT soundtrack are part of the score that was written by Hans Zimmer, so I can't take credit for them, though he did use some of my themes. I agree that the score is beautiful. As to the use of the Hebrew lyrics in "When You Believe": I felt that the song needed a bridge of some kind to build to the triumphant final verse and make a transition out of the bittersweet emotion Moses and the Hebrews felt at having won their liberation at the cost of so much suffering on the part of the Egyptians. But I couldn't really think of anything in English that didn't feel hackneyed or sentimental. So I began to think about the possibility of using Hebrew lyrics. I called one of the religious advisers on the project, Rabbi Robbins in Los Angeles, and asked him if he knew of any Hebrew poetry that might be appropriate, and he suggested the "Song at the Sea", which the Hebrew tribes are supposed to have sung after they crossed over the Sea of Reeds. He thought it would be all right if I used some of the words for the beginning of the Exodus, and I selected the ones I thought were most appropriate for the situation, and then set them to music, trying to use a simple folk-like melody. It was Hans' idea to begin the section with children's voices, yet another of his excellent contributions. Thanks for asking and I'm glad you enjoy the soundtrack. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Prince of Egypt: Use of Hebrew

Question:

At several points in the film the characters sing in Hebrew rather than the language they are heard speaking (English). The first individual character we hear in the film is Yocheved, and she sings her first line in Hebrew, before singing the rest of her lines in English. Later, as the Hebrews leave Egypt (during "When You Believe"), children sing a section of "The Song at the Sea" in Hebrew. (Adult voices are added when the song is reprised after crossing the Sea.) Why is the Hebrew used at these points in the film?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks for your interesting questions. I chose to begin the lullaby of Jocheved in Hebrew because I felt it was a more authentic-feeling and emotional way into the personal story of the character and the movie. Just an instinctive choice on my part. As for its use in the middle of "When You Believe", again, it just felt

to me that anything I wrote in English at that point felt trite. So I called a rabbi to ask if there was anything appropriate in Hebrew I might use, and he suggested adapting "The Song at the Sea". These were both choices, in other words, based on artistic instinct. Beyond that, I can't really explain or justify them. I'm sure your explanation is far more logical and cogent, and I'd love to hear it if you care to send it to me. Thanks for asking. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

"When You Believe" lyrics/text

Question:

Dear Stephen: In the choral renditions of your song "When You Believe" arranged by Audrey Snyder (Cherry Lane Music Co/Hal Leonard Corp) the lyrics read "Michamocha baelim Adonai. Michamocha ne darbakodesh" Shouldn't the 2nd line be: "Mikamocha" with the hard "k" sound not the "ch"? Musically yours, Frank "Farkie"

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Frank: The English transliteration of Hebrew words (as with many languages which don't use the English alphabet) is always tricky. Think of how many ways there are to spell Chanukah/Hannukah. You may well be right that a "k" rather than a "ch" would be more accurate there; I left it to Cherry Lane to double-check with authoritative sources about the spelling of the Hebrew words, and they may have dropped the ball. Not being an expert in Hebrew myself, I can't really answer accurately. Thanks for your interest and your compliments on my work. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from a Forum visitor:

I haven't been on this site in some time, but I can answer this one, having been a Hebrew major. "Farkie" [the person who raised the point] is correct. In the first line, the word Chamocha starts with the "Ch" sound, whereas in the second line it starts with the hard "k" sound Kamocha. They are exactly the same word, though, meaning "like you" (as in "Who is like you, Lord?"). The first Hebrew letter is the same letter, called a "choff" but it can be pronounced either as a "ch" sound or as a "k" sound, depending on the context and how it is "vocalized", meaning whether there is a vowel added to the letter. The whole second line would be better spelled like this: Mi Kamocha, ne'dar bakodesh (who is like you, exalted in holiness).

You Can Work Miracles

Question:

The Prince of Egypt: I read an interview with Jeffrey Katzenberg where he says that in "When you Believe", the lyrics "You can do miracles, when you believe" was changed to "There can be miracles, when you believe" because only God do miracles. I would like to ask you if there are more changes in other songs and if you did work in some deleted (or early ideas of) songs for "The Prince of Egypt"?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It is commonly known that I replaced the line "You can work miracles" with "There can be miracles" in the song "When You Believe", because of objections from the representatives of more conservative religious groups (They felt the line implied that humans can do actual miracles, not just God; as with their interpretation of the Bible itself, they took everything literally with no sense whatsoever of metaphor.) As with the other animated features, there were several songs I wrote which didn't make it into the film. For instance, I took three passes at a song for the spot which ultimately became "Through Heaven's Eyes" (by far the best of the songs I wrote for that spot.) There was one song I was sorry didn't make it into the film -- a song for Moses and Rameses called "Brotherly Love" that occurred at the banquet in the early part of the film and which helped to establish their relationship. It was felt that the

chariot race which preceded it essentially did the same thing, and for length reasons, the song was eliminated.

SECTION 5 – Playing with the Big Boys

Prince of Egypt: Playing with the Big Boys

Question/comment [including criticisms about Playing With the Big Boys]

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The score for PRINCE OF EGYPT was a difficult balancing act, and some of the critical response I think reflects that. Although I never read reviews, I do try to find out what the basic tone of response has been, and in case, it has been all over the map. My goal in all the numbers was basically to advance the story and deepen understanding of the characters and their emotions. Some people seem to have wanted the songs to have more "entertainment" value and are disappointed that the story doesn't stop for numbers, as in some of the other animated features. Others seemed to feel that any presentational or comic tone in the numbers was inappropriate. Much of the same response occurred to THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME (which I continue to feel is Alan Menken's finest music, though it's one of the few scores he didn't receive any awards for.) What I've learned over time about this is that, in the immortal words of Ricky Nelson: "You can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself."

That being said: There was a lot of internal back-and-forth discussion about "Playing with the Big Boys" as all of us worked on the film. I don't think it is the music of the song that is controversial, since it is very much in keeping with the rest of the movie, but the attitude. It began as a much more comic number, a sort of send-up of Las Vegas style magicians, complete with a chorus of female acolytes. This truly did seem out of keeping with the rest of the film. Yet when we tried the film without it or something totally in its place, the whole second half of the movie lacked energy and became unremittingly grim. So we re-addressed the number to make it more ominous while retaining some of the comic elements. This may make it a bid of a hybrid, and that may be what is bothering some of the people who don't like the song.

The major story point of the song of course is to show that showmanship, pomp and pretension are often used as a distraction from lack of real content in a lot of areas, from religion to politics, etc. (This seems to me, with our current Congress for example, to be still relevant.) In any event, some people have told me it's their favorite song, some have told me they don't think it belongs in the movie. All I can say is I did the best I could with that particular moment in the film and "Playing With the Big Boys" is what I came up with. Thanks for your question. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 6 - Cut Songs

Cut songs

[Question missing]

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The best songs cut from PRINCE OF EGYPT were a number for Moses and Rameses called "Brotherly Love" which took place during the banquet scene when Moses is named royal architect by Rameses (I still think it should have been in the movie) and a song welcoming Moses to the Midian tribe called "One

of Us", which was a pretty good song but was replaced by the far superior (in my opinion) "Through Heaven's Eyes."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked" includes the story of Stephen Schwartz's work on The Prince of Egypt, as well as numerous photos of Schwartz in Egypt, and details about each song. www.DefyingGravityTheBook.com.

The DVD of the Prince of Egypt includes a short interview with Stephen Schwartz as part of the special feature on the making of the movie.

For the DVD, CD, sheet music, etc.

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/the-prince-of-egypt.htm>

The Prince of Egypt cast and other movie data

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120794/>