

PROGRAM NOTES BY HAZZAN SAM WEISS

I. CONCERT OPENER:

(1) Dos Land iz Dayn Land

A new socially conscious translation of Woody Guthrie's 1940 ballad "This Land is Your Land." Yiddish translation by Linda Gritz and Daniel Kahn, with Harry Bochner, Michael Alpert, and Josh Waletzky.

II. CLASSIC SONGS OF THE YIDDISH/CANTORIAL BLEND:

(2) Dos Yidishe Lid ("Jewish Song") music by Sholom Secunda; lyrics by Anshel Schorr

In its heyday, the American Yiddish stage nurtured—and was nurtured by—the synagogue *bima*. Most of the important Second Avenue composers and singers began their careers as *shul* choristers, while the scales, melodies, and even texts of the *siddur* and *machzor* mingled freely with melodramas of life and love. Perhaps Sholom Secunda (1894–1977) best embodied this blending of sacred and secular sounds, from his childhood days as a synagogue soloist and a touring young *khazn* (cantor), through an adult career as the reigning 20th Century Yiddish stage and film composer. The mix of cantorial, folk, and popular Jewish styles in "Dos Yiddishe Lid" encapsulates the variety of Jewish themes heard in tonight's concert. The poignant text by lyricist Anshel Schorr (1871-1942), himself a son and brother of famed cantors, illustrates how Yiddish theater continued to provide spiritual uplift even to audiences who no longer attended the synagogue.

*Though a Jew be poor, he is still rich with spiritual treasures.
He is patient, his faith is strong, he survives the greatest calamity.
He is considered of royal pedigree, and many think he's fantastically wealthy,
Yet no country welcomes him.*

*All nations rowdily celebrate the New Year with song and dance;
But on Rosh Hashanah, a Jew sits in the synagogue with great solemnity,
Hearing from his cantor a very different type of song:*

*"THOUGH LACKING IN MERIT, I STAND IN TREPIDATION BEFORE THEE,
O GOD OF ISRAEL'S PRAISES..."*

*And in every synagogue on Yom Kippur Eve you will hear the cantor chant the Kol Nidre
declaration:*

*"ALL MANNER OF ILL-CONSIDERED VOLUNTARY VOWS AND PLEDGES
FROM THIS YOM KIPPUR UNTIL THE NEXT WE HEREBY REGRET..."*

*But there are times when the Jewish people are quite merry, singing without fear and with
great joy, like on the holiday of Simchat Torah:*

*"CELEBRATE AND REJOICE ON SIMCHAT TORAH; BRING HONOR TO THE TORAH.
ITS VALUE IS BEYOND ALL WEALTH, MORE PRECIOUS THAN JEWELS..."*

(3) Vos Iz Gevorn Fun Mayn Shtetele? ("Whatever Became of My Hometown?")

music by Abraham Ellstein; lyrics by Isadore Lillian

This is a nostalgic song about nostalgia. Compared to the previous selection which recreates actual scenes and moods of synagogue music, here the singer is filled with longing and hometown memories which include walking past the synagogue. Even though it is an element peripheral to her own younger years, the *khazn*'s voice remains a defining feature of her growing up.

When I think back to my childhood years in the shtetl, I recall how we strolled in the beautiful nights of winter past the synagogue, where the cantor's voice poured forth with devotion:

"AS A SHEPHERD WHO TAKES CARE OF HIS FLOCK, LEADING HIS SHEEP WITH THE ROD AND COUNTING THEM ONE BY ONE..."

*Oh, those little streets, the shul, the tree, the mill—will I yet see them again?
Whatever happened to my shtetl; whatever happened to the old home?*

(4) Eli Eli Lomo Azavtoni ("My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?")
composed by Jacob Koppel Sandler

Written for an 1896 Yiddish melodrama, this runaway hit by an obscure composer who neglected to copyright his work yielded considerably more fame and fortune to the countless singers and music publishers who took advantage of the composer's oversight. Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt, in particular, catapulted this song to international fame through concert performances, recordings, and sheet music, which fueled the assumption that he also composed it. The opening four title words are taken from Psalm 22, and the song ends with the line *Shema Yisrael...* Connecting these two Hebrew sources are Yiddish lines remarkable for their pathos more than for their poetry.

*"My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"
In fire and flames they burnt us; Everywhere they shamed and mocked us
But no one could turn us away from You, my God,
From Your Holy Torah and Mitzvot...
Save me, oh save me from danger,
As You once saved our fathers from angry judgments...
"Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is One."*

(5) Mayn Zeyd's Kholem ("My Grandfather's Dream") composed by Abraham Slinger

Abraham Slinger (1876-1961) was a cantor-composer who specialized in writing Yiddish songs for cantors. As such, his creations are rich in both textual and musical liturgical content. The scenes depicted in "My Grandfather's Dream" (which, strictly speaking, is actually the grandchild's dream) have a quasi-operatic grand sweep to them, punctuated by varied traditional sounds of the synagogue.

"Tell me, Zeyde, what is it like for our people up there?" And he described the scurrying angels in Heaven along with the Sages and biblical figures, all interceding with the Almighty on Israel's behalf. Iconic texts such as AVINU MALKEINU, SHMA KOILEINU and the TEN COMMANDMENTS are invoked with great passion. "Yes, Lord, we have sinned, but we are Your children, so we beg You to give heed to Your parental obligations K'RACHEM AV AL BANIM to forgive us once again." By the end of the dream Moses and God seem to reach an understanding. Our merciful Father in Heaven promises that as long as we obey the commandments, He will indeed have mercy and forgive His children.

(6) Hob Ikh Mir a Shpan ("I Have Horses and a Wagon")
folk song collected by Ruth Rubin; arr: Jeff Warschauer & Deborah Strauss

While many of the selections on our program display the more flamboyant aspects of cantorial singing, the music of this charming rarely heard song is marked by the contemplative intimacy of a private individual *davening* alone, complaining of various shortcomings that close off the

possibilities of gainful employment. Yet the singer also invokes the calling of the *khazn* in the final lines of this all-Yiddish folk song of poverty and work.

I could be a coach driver...

I have a coach covered with black leather.

I have two horses like lions, and four wheels.

Refrain:

But the wheels don't roll and the horses won't go;

And the wife is cursing, and I need a glass of whiskey.

I see a stone...and I sit on it and cry.

I would have been a merchant, but I have no merchandise;

I would have been a teacher, but I do not know any Torah.

I could have been a cobbler, but I do not have an awl;

I could have been a cantor, but I haven't got a voice.

III. SHABES

(7) **Veshomru** ("Friday Night Prayer") composed by Lipa Feingold, based on traditional liturgy

Veshomru represents a common Ashkenazic song device in which the lines of a Hebrew liturgical text alternate with Yiddish narrative, commentary and/or translation, thus replicating the elementary school *cheider* experience of studying the Bible.

When you arrive in shul on Friday night you hear the khazn singing soulfully about the beautiful shabes, an exclusive gift bestowed upon the Jewish people...

"THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL SHALL OBSERVE SHABBAT, MAKING SHABBAT A COVENANT FOR ETERNITY. BETWEEN ME AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL IT IS A SIGN FOREVER; FOR IN SIX DAYS GOD MADE THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH, AND ON THE SEVENTH DAY HE RESTED AND WAS REFRESHED.

(8) **Ikh Benk Aheym** ("I Long for Home") music by Joseph Rumshinsky; original lyrics by Ludwig Satz; additional words by Judith Altmann and Deborah Katchko-Gray

In a style similar to the previous *Veshomru* (#7), *Ikh Benk Aheym* takes us through many of the domestic ritual observances of *shabes*, with emphasis on the musical pleasures they provide. In tonight's performance the nostalgic element is personalized and ratcheted up a notch by invoking the performer's personal family history which includes the name of her grandfather, the legendary Hazzan Adolph Katchko (1888–1958).

How I miss my home... my childhood years... Friday night at my father's table. After making Kiddush and having eaten the gefilte fish, my father would pray:

*"WHOEVER SANCTIFIES THE SABBATH PROPERLY
WHOEVER GUARDS THE SABBATH FROM DESECRATION
HIS GREAT REWARD WILL FIT HIS EFFORTS
'EVERY MAN AT HIS OWN CAMP, EVERY MAN AT HIS OWN BANNER...'"*

(9) **Shabes Baym Shalosh Seudes / Di Naye Vokh** ("The Sabbath Third Meal/The New Week") composed by Abraham Wolf Binder / Samuel Gozinsky

This pair of songs by different composers are well-matched in mood and subject. The first one evokes the scene of a dimly lit late Sabbath afternoon obligatory meal. It is a time for pensive song and introspective discussion. The "Atah Echad" verses excerpted from the Mincha prayer serve as the musical centerpiece that anchors the proceedings. Once the Shabbat has passed into the night, prospects brighten as we welcome, in the second one, the hero of the moment Elijah the Prophet, harbinger of Messianic deliverance.

At the shalosh seudes meal my father would sit deep in thought; out of the dark arose a voice of sweet devotion inspired by the angels that hovered over him:

YOU ARE ONE AND YOUR NAME IS ONE; AND YOUR NATION ISRAEL IS UNIQUE...

Right after the Havdalah ceremony everyone's home lights up with joy and expectation as we welcome Elijah:

ELIJAH THE PROPHET, ELIJAH THE TISHBITE, ELIJAH OF GILEAD...

(10) **Far Vos Zingt a Khazn?** ("What Makes a Khazn Sing?") music by Sholom Secunda; lyrics by Jacob Jacobs; adapted by Sarah Myerson

A perennial favorite for lightening the mood at a cantorial concert, this song asks and answers its question tongue-in-cheek, but along the way it affords the soloist some room to strut his stuff. Oops... Make that "to strut her stuff!" Hazzan Myerson has chosen to update and individualize *Far Vos Zingt a Khazn* to better fit her own personality:

*The world asks a question, why does a cantor sing? Because I like to.
Why do I like to? Because I'm a cantor, and cantors like to sing.
When it goes well for me, I sing happily; when it goes badly, I sing sadly.
I sit and think, singing, in bed by night, singing. At a Bas Mitsve I sing, at a wedding I sing,
Even in danger I sing. When I have a good position and don't need to worry, I sing.
When I have a bad day to complain about, I sing. Purim, Peysekh, Shovues I sing.
When I have a complaint against God, I plead for God to "Deliver us."*

*HOSHANA, DELIVER US, FOR YOUR SAKE, OUR GOD, DELIVER US. FOR YOUR SAKE, OUR CREATOR,
DELIVER US.*

FOR YOUR SAKE, OUR REDEEMER, DELIVER US. FOR YOUR SAKE, OUR SEEKER, DELIVER US.

IV. YOMIM NOROIM

(11) **Zochreinu L'chayim** ("Remember Us for Life") composed by Abraham Singer

Our first High Holidays selection is another narrative-Yiddish-liturgical creation by Abraham Singer. He takes us through the entire period on the musical wings of the *nusach* (traditional chanting modes) of the season. Thus each return of the *Zochreinu L'chayim* refrain feels like a congregational event, rather than a mere compositional device.

As the Ten Formidable Days approach, everyone is constantly thinking:

"REMEMBER US FOR LIFE, SOVEREIGN WHO DESIRES LIFE."

May God remember to grant him life in this New Year!

"There is no one so righteous as to avoid sin." Dear God,

"FORGIVE US, PARDON US, GRANT US ATONEMENT!"

*All of Yom Kippur spent in fasting and prayer... The hour of Neilah is here;
Everyone feels better, everyone feels forgiven, all are transformed into singers:
"REMEMBER US FOR LIFE, SOVEREIGN WHO DESIRES LIFE, SEAL US INTO THE BOOK OF LIFE."
May God remember to grant him life in this New Year!*

(12) **A Mayse—Haveyn Yakir Li** ("A Story--Efrayim is My Precious Son")
folk song, arr: Chaim Kotylansky, Sam Weiss

Haveyn yakir li efrayim is the verse from Jeremiah 31:20 that is included in the "Remembrance" section of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf Amidah. This Yiddish-Hebrew "story" is attributed to Levi-Yitzchok of Berditchev (1740–1809). It is a dialogue between the celebrated hasidic master's father and a townswoman of Berditchev. As a beloved *sh'liach tzibbur*, Levi-Yitzchok would make the High Holidays liturgy come alive to his congregants by interpolating explanations, stories, and musical orations. A favored practice of his was to chant a prayer alternating short Hebrew phrases with their Yiddish translations.

*"My father, of blessed memory, told me a story...
A woman came to him crying bitterly, so he asked her, 'Why do you cry, my dear heart?'
She replied, 'I cry because my head aches.' Dad said, 'Don't cry, dear...
If you cry, your head will ache even more.' But the woman said to him,
'How can I not cry when the Fearful Days are near, and my children may not find grace
in the eyes of the Lord?' Then Dad said to her, 'Stop weeping, Dear!
The Almighty is a merciful Father; He will surely have mercy on His children—especially on
such dear children. Is it not written:*

*'...EFRAYIM IS MY DEAR SON, HE IS MY BELOVED CHILD; WHEN I SPEAK OF HIM,
I AM REMINDED OF HIM MORE AND MORE; THEREFORE MY HEART YEARNs FOR HIM,
AND I SHALL HAVE MERCY ON HIM. SO SAYS THE LORD.'"*

V. YIDDISH FAVORITES

(12) **Halevay** ("I Wish, I Wish") composed by Moishe Oysher; additional lyrics: Aliza Spiro

This Yinglish novelty song may have had a scant relationship with cantorial music as originally recorded by Moishe Oysher and the Barry Sisters, but it sure displayed vocal acrobatics. Hazzan Spiro, however, has added a healthy dose of *Hazzones* to the totally updated version you will hear tonight.

*Halevay means "How I wish, I hope, I pray,"
And when you really wish and hope and pray,
Luck is bound to come around your way.*

*Halevay I wish I were a bumble bee,
And if I only were a bumble bee,
All my honey I would give to thee.*

(14) **A Dудele** ("A Thou Song") folk song, arr: Leo Low

Another Yiddish-Hebrew folk song attributed to "Levi-Yitzchok the Berditchever." The somewhat enigmatic title refers to the Yiddish word for "you" or "thou," while also suggesting a shepherd's bagpipe ("dudelzak") as well as the concept of singing a "ditty." Like many of the great hasidic

leaders and teachers, Levi-Yitzchok was constantly working on his relationship with God. What set him apart, however, was how public and demonstrative was his God-intoxication. At the core of *A Dudele* are the lines of a poem by Yehuda Halevi (1075-1141): “Where shall I find You/High and hidden is Your place/And where shall I not find You/The world is full of Your glory.”

*Master of the universe, I'll sing a dudele for You. You, You, You, You ...
Wherever I go: You! And wherever I stay: You! Just You, only You, again You, but You!
When something's good: You. When, G-d forbid, it's bad: You.
East—You; West—You; South—You; North—You; Up in Heaven: You. Down on earth: You.*

(15) **Af B'ri** (“Prayer for Rain”) folk song; arr: Henry Russotto

The final selection which illustrates tonight's theme is a song that wraps a Yiddish blanket completely and ironically around its cantorial core. The liturgy for the last day of Sukkot features a group of prayers that are unique in content as well as in musical style, thus capturing the folk imagination. There are many Yiddish songs that describe the poverty and drudgery of everyday *shtetl* life. *Af-Bri* achieves a special sense of sarcasm by contrasting this drudgery with the lofty sonority of the synagogue, by skewering the obscure liturgical words, and by making a liturgical refrain out of the phrase “And there's no money.”

“AF-BRI IS THE DESIGNATED NAME OF THE RAIN ANGEL...” Early in the morning after Yom Tov, folks must run through the streets to buy potatoes.. And there's no money. Winter will come soon, Oy! There are big puddles outside, and my boots are full of patches. And there's no money. Itas! It's cold and damp in the house, just like outside. The roof is broken and the walls are falling in- And there's no money. The teacher is bothering me to pay him. The boy's going around in a torn caftan, and the daughter has no dowry. And there's no money.

VI. CONCERT CLOSER

(16) **Ale Brider** (“Brethren All”) Morris Winshevsky

A traditional song about the joy of camaraderie which is often updated and modified to suit the occasion—including tonight's beautiful occasion!

We are all brothers and sisters, and we sing happy songs;
We stick together, like no one else;
We are all united whether we are many or few;
We are all *khazonim* who are meeting *ponim el ponim*.