

**BAY MIR BISTU SHEYN**  
**GREAT SONGS OF THE YIDDISH STAGE, VOL. 2**  
**Sholom Secunda, Alexander Olshanetsky**  
**and other songwriters of their circle**

This disc, the second in the Milken Archive's three-part CD series, Great Songs of the American Yiddish Stage, features 17 selections by two of the most renowned composers active on Second Avenue—Sholom Secunda and Alexander Olshanetsky—as well as by other composers of their circle. Heard here in new, historically informed orchestrations and idiomatic performances, most of these songs were derived from full-length theatrical productions, which were variously called operettas, musical comedies, melodramas or musical shows. While these productions were filled with predictable plots, stock characters and theatrical clichés, the music was the dominant element; contemporary critics frequently decried the librettos but praised the scores. It is the authentic sound and spirit of this vibrant repertoire that the Milken Archive has sought to bring to life.

The selections on this CD reveal the wide range of Yiddish theater songs—lively and spirited, lyrical and quasi-operatic, comical, nostalgic, moralistic, and suggestive. They echo as well the genre's various musical sources, among them Viennese light operetta, perceived Eastern European folk idioms and klezmer sonorities, and liturgical chant. One can also detect hints of what would become familiar characteristics of the Broadway musical and American popular song. Reconstructing the dramatic contexts of these songs is extremely difficult. Undated scripts, often filled with undecipherable notes and cryptic instructions, in draft form and handwritten, have been located for only some of the shows; whole sections are often missing. As Milken Archive Artistic Director Neil Levin explains, "Rarely are specific locations within the action indicated for particular songs, and it is impossible to know how much was changed by the time the curtain rose...Songs were frequently moved from one spot to another and others were added after a show was composed...The actors were also permitted considerable freedom to improvise and ad-lib from one performance to another."

The title song on this album, **Sholom Secunda's** lively *Bay mir bistu sheyn*, is acknowledged as the world's best-known and longest-reigning Yiddish theater song of all time, familiar even to non-Jews in Europe, the Americas and Japan. Few are aware of its birth in the theater, however, like so many tunes that later achieved independent popularity. More ironic, points out Neil Levin, "is the lack of awareness in the general world of its Jewish origins or even associations, since its more famous English version is nearly always perceived merely as an icon of 1930s American popular song." Secunda composed *Bay mir bistu sheyn* (*In My*

*Eyes You're Beautiful*) for his 1932 musical comedy *M'ken lebn nor m'lost nit—I Would if I Could*. As an instant hit in the Second Avenue milieu, it was published independently by its composer and lyricist and sold well in Jewish markets. But since such hits usually continued to engage that fickle public only for a show's initial season, Secunda—unable to imagine its future potential ability to captivate non-Jewish audiences—sold the rights to a publisher four years later for a pittance.

Stories abound concerning the succession of events that catapulted the song onto the international scene as an overnight commercial sensation that over the years has generated gargantuan royalties and revenues. We do know that two months after Secunda sold the rights, well-known lyricist Sammy Cahn wrote an English adaptation of the Yiddish lyrics to *Bay mir bistu sheyn*; apart from retaining those four words in the original Yiddish, those English lyrics are not a translation, but an almost generic expression of courtship that bears no relation to the particular theme of the original Yiddish words. The English version was then recorded by the up-and-coming Andrews Sisters, and its release and initial radio broadcasts detonated an explosive coup beyond anyone's expectations: sales exceeded those of any previous American hit recording. Winning the ASCAP award for the most popular song of 1938, *Bay mir bistu sheyn* was given further new treatments and arrangements in renditions by dozens of singers and orchestras—including Ella Fitzgerald, Tommy Dorsey, Guy Lombardo, the Ramsey Lewis Trio, the Barry Sisters, Judy Garland, Rudy Vallee, Kate Smith, and many others. The best-known “swing” version was introduced by Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall, and the English version has been translated into dozens of languages.

Sholom Secunda (1894–1974) was one of the most distinguished composers associated with the American Yiddish theater, for which he wrote more than 80 operettas and musicals, as well as dozens of independent songs. In addition, he studied at the Institute for Musical Art (now The Juilliard School) and with composer Ernest Bloch, and wrote many classically-oriented compositions, including cantatas, cantorial-choral settings, a string quartet, a violin concerto and an orchestral tone poem (all recorded for the first time by the Milken Archive). Although he never abandoned Second Avenue altogether, by 1930 Secunda became disillusioned with the banal level of much popular Yiddish theater and its artistically counterproductive star system. He turned to Yiddish art songs, became music director of two prominent radio stations, and established a lasting artistic association with cantor and internationally renowned tenor Richard Tucker, for whom he arranged and composed a considerable amount of Hebrew liturgical music. Secunda hoped to be remembered primarily for his classical music accomplishments rather than as a Yiddish theater composer, a hope that in view of his overriding fame on Second Avenue, will probably go unfulfilled.

In an entirely different vein is another of the most enduring of all Yiddish theater songs, the heartrending lament or “torch song,” ***IKH HOB DIKH TSUFIL LIB*** (I Love You Too Much), by **Alexander Olshanetsky**, from his 1933-34 musical comedy *Der katerinshtshik* (The Organ-grinder), which counted Boris Thomashevsky's sister, Annie, among its stars. While the plot

was dismissed by the critics, the music was called “a classic that would have been appropriate for the best Viennese operetta ... a jewel of the Yiddish stage.” *Ikh hob dikh tsufil lib*, a soaring lyrical expression of unrequited love and unselfishness, clearly bespeaks the Yiddish theater’s roots in operetta, and demands a classically trained voice to do it justice. In the years following the original production, this song, in vocal and instrumental versions, became a favorite of Jewish wedding bands and popular entertainers in the non-Jewish world, becoming completely divorced from its original theatrical context. Subsequent recordings included English renditions in a host of styles by Gene Krupa, Ella Fitzgerald, Jan Peerce (in the original Yiddish version), Connie Francis, Dean Martin, and Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians—in a choral arrangement. Alexander Olshanetsky was a leading and prolific member of the Yiddish theater “pantheon” of composers who clearly understood the musical yearnings of the immigrant Jewish population.

Other highlights of this Milken Archive disc include two spirited selections with a characteristic Eastern European flavor—*Lebn zol kolumbus*, which expresses a typical immigrant enthusiasm for the “new land” and its opportunities, and *Hudl min shtrudl*; as well as Secunda’s wistful *Mayn yidishe meydle* and dramatic *Dos yidishe lid*, which integrates three familiar Hebrew prayers and requires an expert cantorial rendition. It also includes the cautionary song *Samet un zayd*, which warns young women to guard against seduction by unscrupulous men who ply them with lavish gifts, and Olshanetsky’s touching *Unter beymer*, a lullaby sung by a cantor to his child, whom he is leaving to pursue an operatic career in the city, and written for a well-known Yiddish film starring Moishe Oysher.

## THE MILKEN ARCHIVE OF AMERICAN JEWISH MUSIC on NAXOS AMERICAN CLASSICS

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**Catalogue number: 8.559432**

**Playing time: 68:45**

1. ***Bay mir bistu sheyn* (In My Eyes You’re Beautiful) Secunda**  
Simon Spiro, tenor
2. ***Ikh hob dikh tsufil lib* (I Love You Too Much) Olshanetsky**  
Amy Goldstein, soprano
3. ***Eyn kuk af dir* (Just One Look at You) Olshanetsky**  
Amy Goldstein, soprano; Simon Spiro, tenor
4. ***A malke af peysekh* (A Queen for Passover) Gilrod \***  
Bruce Adler, tenor

5. ***Glik (Happiness)*** Olshanetsky  
Robert Abelson, baritone
6. ***Lebn zol kolumbus (Long Live Columbus!)*** Perlmutter and Wohl  
Joanne Borts, mezzo-soprano
7. ***A gute heym (A Good Home)*** Olshanetsky  
Robert Bloch, tenor
8. ***Nu, zog mir shoyrn ven (So Just Tell Me When, Already)*** Olshanetsky  
Amy Goldstein, soprano; Simon Spiro, tenor
9. ***Dos yidishe lid (The Jewish Song)*** Secunda \*  
Benzion Miller, tenor
10. ***Mit dir in eynem (Together with You)*** Trilling  
Amy Goldstein, soprano
11. ***Mayn yidishe meydle (My Jewish Girl)*** Secunda  
Simon Spiro, tenor
12. ***Slutsk (A town in Belarus—formerly Lithuania)*** Wohl  
Robert Abelson, baritone
13. ***Samet un zayd (Velvet and Silk)*** Wohl  
Amy Goldstein, soprano
14. ***Hudl mitn shtrudl (Hudl with Her Strudel)*** Unknown \*  
Bruce Adler, tenor; David Krakauer, clarinet
15. ***Unter beymer (Beneath the Trees)*** Olshanetsky  
Simon Spiro, tenor
16. ***Ikh bin farlibt (I'm in Love)*** Olshanetsky  
Amy Goldstein, soprano; Simon Spiro, tenor
17. ***Skrip klezmerl, skripe! (Fiddle, Klezmer, Scrape Away!)*** Secunda  
Simon Spiro, tenor

Vienna Chamber Orchestra

Elli Jaffe, conductor

\* Barcelona Symphony / National Orchestra of Catalonia