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Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum Introduces Volume 9:

The Art of Jewish Song: Yiddish and Hebrew

If you were looking for an alternative title for Volume 9 from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience, you could do worse than to borrow a line from the musical satirist Tom Lehrer. "As someone remarked to Schubert," Lehrer once sang, "take us to your *lieder*."

The *lieder* to which Lehrer referred are amongst the greatest examples of chamber music ever written: duets for voice and piano featuring German poetry by the likes of Goethe and Schiller, set to music by German Romantic composers such as Schumann, Schubert, and Brahms.

Over time, the term *lieder* became synonymous with the concept of art song in general, encompassing works by Debussy and Ravel, Britten and Barber, Rorem and Rachmaninoff – and, as *The Art of Jewish Song* demonstrates, by American Jewish composers like Helfman and Secunda, Weiner and Wyner, Binder and Ben-Amots.

Building on earlier work by European Jewish composers who arranged traditional Yiddish folk songs for the concert stage, the American Jewish composers featured in Volume 9 – some immigrants, some native-born – crafted original art songs using texts by major Yiddish and Hebrew poets.

Many American Jewish *lieder* bear traces of the Old World, with intimations of klezmer music and Hassidic song. But they also reflect the breadth of styles encompassed by modern American classical music. And their texts touch upon everything from profound philosophical and religious themes, such as the relationship between man and God (see Lazar Weiner's setting of "*Got un mentsch*," by the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel) to nostalgic portraits of *shtetl* life (Ben-Amots' "*Shtetl Songs*"). At their best, these songs achieve the same level of artistry as their German Romantic predecessors.

The composer Lazar Weiner, for example, had an uncanny knack for capturing the characteristic rhythms and inflections of the Yiddish language – and a similar talent for crafting piano-vocal duets in which both participants function as equal partners.

Weiner, who was born in the Ukraine and developed a passion for Jewish folk song and modern Yiddish poetry only after coming to America, often weaved traditional Jewish material into his songs so subtly that you'd be hard pressed to recognize it.

But that's hardly the case with "*Yosl klezmer*," whose original melody is infused with the bittersweet quality that seems part and parcel of Eastern European Jewish culture. (Hanoch Kon's "*Der badkhn*," which sets a poem about a wedding entertainer, makes similar use of Jewish roots music, dipping into the distinctive rhythms and melodies of klezmer to express the same characteristic mixture of joy and sorrow.) Or consider "*Der yid mitn fidl*," in which the inimitable Robert Abelson, a cantor and opera singer who worked with Weiner, alternates between his rich baritone and a wheedling, almost-speaking voice that is as Yiddish as Yiddish can be.

The piano part in "*Yidish*," meanwhile, is inventive enough to stand on its own; yet it fits hand in glove with Weiner's equally captivating vocal line. (Much the same can be said of "*Mi ma'amikim*," by the great theatrical composer Sholom Secunda – a musical polymath whose work can be heard in several other volumes.) The turbulent, Impressionistic piano component of "*Ikh hob far dir a sod*" is as technically demanding, and as emotionally complex, as anything in the repertoire. And the spikily dissonant piano introduction to "*Got un mentsch*" evolves into something that is less a subordinate accompaniment than an independent piece – albeit one that meshes seamlessly with the speech-like vocal part. In each of these perfectly turned miniatures, piano and voice contribute equally to the task of expressing poetic meaning and sentiment.

The same is true of "*S'iz nito kayn nekht*," by Weiner's son, Yehuda Wyner. Though unapologetically Jewish in its musical references, this is also a thoroughly contemporary piece of art music in which voice and piano comprise a unified whole. (Also newly available in *The Art of Jewish Song* is an excerpt from Yehudi Wyner's oral history. Visit the Milken Archive's virtual museum to learn more about what made Lazar Weiner tick, and what it was like to be his son.)

Max Helfman's settings of two Hebrew poems by Hannah Szenesh (*A Voice Called* and *Blessed is the Match*) also combine traditional source material with modernist technique, and exhibit a comparable degree of musical sophistication and psychological depth – as do the individual pieces in "*Shtetl Songs*," by the Israeli-born composer Ofer Ben-Amots.

Like Weiner, Ben-Amots only discovered his passion for Yiddish folk song after leaving home – though in Ben-Amots case, the epiphany took place in Germany, where he studied for a time before coming to America. ("*Shtetl Songs*" was the first work that Ben-Amots completed in the United States.) "*Bay dem shtetl*" is one of the most uncompromisingly modern works in the entire volume, as is "*Der rebbe tantst*," which embeds hints of Eastern European Jewish music in an extraordinarily rich fabric that embraces dance rhythms, quasi-recitative, and brooding dissonance.

Call them Jewish art songs. Call them Yiddish and Hebrew *lieder*. Call them whatever you like. These works deserve to stand alongside the finest examples of music for voice and piano in any language.

Founded in 1990 by philanthropist Lowell Milken, the Milken Archive of Jewish Music reflects the scope and variety of Jewish life in America. The Archive's virtual museum www.milkenarchive.org is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos and essays.

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