

A FEW WORDS ABOUT YIDDISH SONGS

When I tell people that I teach Yiddish, they frequently ask, "Are there students who want to study it seriously, and are there people who speak Yiddish?" I tell them "Yes." Then they ask "But why did your students decide to learn Yiddish?" Well, there are different reasons. Many people discover Yiddish through Jewish songs; they hear something appealing and mysterious in a melody and they hear the unknown words. These are not just people who have Yiddish in their family background, but there are French, German, Chinese and even Hindus among my students.

The great Yiddish writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer, at the time he was presented with the Nobel Prize for Literature, said: " Yiddish is a language for all of us; the language of frightened men who still believe." He was also asked "Why do you write in Yiddish when it is a dying language?" His response "With our people, nothing ever dies."

For me, Yiddish songs have a special power, and for many people Jewish culture has its origins in music. Since my early childhood, Yiddish was connected with the song "Tum-Balalayke." In time I discovered the rich language of Jewish authors: Isaac Singer, Sholem Aleichem, Itzik Manger, Abraham Sutzkever, et cetera. I was exposed to the wisdom of Jewish proverbs and jokes, the appeal of Hassidic tales, the pivotal moments in Jewish history, and the influence of Yiddish on Jewish culture.

The word "Klezmer" or "Klazmer" from the Hebrew "*klay-zamer*" means "the instruments of music," and in Yiddish it means "musician". Ashkenazi Jews, those whose culture and language were founded on the territory of modern Germany, considered wedding music the most important music of. However, because of the religious prohibition of playing musical instruments on "Shabbos" ("Shabbat" in contemporary Hebrew, i.e. the sacred day of rest from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday) and many Jewish holidays, traditional Klezmer music became mostly associated with weddings.

Klezmer tradition developed under the strong influence of the Bessarabian people. Bessarabia occupied the region where modern-day Moldova and Ukraine are located. One can easily hear similarities between traditional Jewish and Moldavian wedding music. Additionally, never forgetting their roots, the Jews preserved a strong Middle Eastern element in both wedding

and Cantorial music (vocal synagogue music). One can hear Turkish and Arabic strains in Klezmer melodies.

The “niguns” style (*nign* in Yiddish, *pl. nigunim*) is a cappella, a melody without any words and without musical instruments. It was developed in response to the religious prohibition against the use of musical instruments on Shabbat and many of the Jewish holidays. One of the appeals of instrumental Klezmer is that it hints at the qualities of the human voice.

There are many traditional Klezmer “dreidlach” (meaning “tops”, i.e. various musical elaborations). The principle one is “krakhtz” (meaning “groan”). Here we touch upon one more characteristic of Klezmer music; its lyricism combined with tragedy. Even in the most cheerful melodies, there are suggestions of sadness. A popular Yiddish song “Der Aleph Bays” (“Alphabet”) describes grammar lessons for small children in “Chader” (Jewish primary school) and contains the following words: “When you grow up, my children, you will understand how many tears and how much mourning is hidden in these letters.”

Yiddish theater profoundly affected the development of much of Yiddish music. The founder of Yiddish theatre was the playwright, poet and composer, Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908). His various operettas drew inspiration from Jewish folklore. This style of musical theatre flowered in America and reached its peak in the works of Alexander Olshanetskiy (1892–1946), Joseph Rumshinskiy (1881–956), Sholem Second (1894–1974) and Abraham Elstein (“Eiba Ellstein”, 1907–1963) – the so-called “Big Four” of Yiddish musical theatre.

By the 1920’s, the world of Yiddish theatre was situated mostly on Second Avenue in New York City, and was a serious competitor to Broadway. On any evening, they were offering no less than a few dozen dramatic performances and operettas.

Although the Klezmer tradition continued in America, other popular styles of American music, such as jazz, influenced the Klezmer sound. The most popular stars of this type of music were the Barry sisters, Claire & Merna. Their success went far beyond the Yiddish-speaking and even Jewish world. In 1959, they were among a group of American singers who went to the USSR. They became phenomenally popular among Soviet Jews and non-Jews alike. Their influence is still strong in Russia today.

The Klezmer Revival in the USA began in the 1970's and was promoted by people such as Alan Bern, Mikhail Alpert, Frank London, Khankus Netski, Andy Stateman, Yeyl Strom, et cetera. Seeking an authentic Klezmer sound, many musicians researched in music libraries, listened to pre-war gramophone records, took lessons from old klezmer musicians, and traveled throughout Eastern Europe.

Today one can find both old and new Yiddish songs interpreted differently than in the past. There are combinations with rock & jazz, as well as with non-Jewish music. Large Klezmer festivals and master-classes are held in the USA, Canada, England, Germany, Russia and other countries. Because of their mixture of joy, sadness and irony, Yiddish songs still intrigue and charm modern listeners. And that is why I continue to have students who are interested to learn more about Yiddish, its music and songs.

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DI GRINE KUZINE

One of the most popular songs in Yiddish, created in 1921, is DI GRINE KUZINE. This song recalls the experience of Jews and non-Jews who immigrated to the USA at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Those Jews who arrived previously referred to them as "greenhorn" or 'à –greener," which in Yiddish means a naïve, clueless newcomer.

The long and expensive trip across the Atlantic, and the uncertainty of gaining entry at New York's Ellis Island, were just the beginning of their hardships. Jews from Eastern Europe believed America was a "golden land" (a "goldene medine"), where even the streets were paved with gold. Instead of their fantasies and dreams, they encountered new hardships, a new language, and strange customs.

This song evokes the longings of a whole generation of Jewish immigrants. The authors of this song were from that generation, although their lives were not typical of it. They were the successful representatives of Jewish show-business life, and escaped many of the hardships the majority of new immigrants faced.

Chaim Prisant (1890–1945), one of DI GRINE KUZINE authors, was born and grew up in Kishinev, which at that time was part of the Russian Empire. He arrived in America soon after the Kishinev pogrom in 1903. A year after his arrival, his Father died and he returned to Russia. He returned to America only in 1914, right before World War I.

His co-author, Yakov Leizerovich (1891–1967), grew up in Brest-Litovsk (now known as Belarus) and left for the USA in 1913. Both men came from traditional Jewish families.

The same was true for Abe (Abraham) Schwartz (1881–1963) violinist, pianist, director and composer, who created the music for this song. He emigrated from Rumania to America in 1889.

The disappointment expressed in DI GRINE KUZINE represents only part of the Jewish immigrant experience in America. Despite the hardships of immigrant life, the Jewish Exodus from Eastern Europe, especially from the "Pale of Settlement" in the Russian Empire, turned out to be one of the most successful migrations in the history of the Jewish people.

Even the sound of DI GRINE KUZINE is not all negative. Listen to its music; you may find a dance or jazz rhythm, an upbeat tempo, and even a suggestion of hope and freedom.

TUM-BALALAYKE

This famous song derives from old Jewish folklore. In the folklore of Poland, Germany, the Ukraine and Russia, one finds similar songs structured as puzzles, sometimes together with the answers, as in this case. Not only songs, but also many tales describe situations where, in order to win over his beloved, a young boy needs to solve a task and overcome obstacles, sometimes at the risk of his life.

Here in TUM-BALALAYKE a girl needs to overcome an obstacle, the viewing of the bride. She answers perfectly the questions she is asked, but also calls her "examiner" (who is presumable her intended) "silly boy." The girl's clever answers demonstrate to all present that her intended is indeed her "bashert" (soul mate).

There are different versions of this song, including couplets with additional puzzles, and not all of these puzzles are connected with the subject of love and courtship: "What is quicker than a mouse?" (a cat), "what is more bitter than bile?" (death), "what is deeper than a well?" (Torah).

Today's version of TUM-BALALAYKE is found in the repertoire of Abe (Abraham) Elstein, who was the first to publish it in 1940. Elstein was born to an immigrant family in New York, and from his early childhood considered a musical "wunderkind". When he was six, he entered the choir of the legendary cantor, Yossele Rosenblatt (Elstein later became his accompanist). At the age of eight, Elstein wrote his first opera, and at 12 he directed the children's choir of the Metropolitan-Opera.

Initially he dedicated his career to Jewish theatre and cinema. He created both new music to perform and new arrangements for the operettas of Abraham Goldfaden, Joseph Rumshinskiy, among the others. At the end of the 1930's, he wrote the music for three Yiddish films, directed by Joseph Green: "Little Jew with Violin" (1936) "Letter to Mama" (1938) and "Mommy" (1938).

It was Elstein's version of TUM-BALALAYKE that the Barry Sisters sang, and it eventually became their signature song. One could ask why it is still so popular? There are no wedding traditions in it, no Rabbis, no Jewish poverty, no yearning for Moshia's (Messiah's) arrival. The sound of the balalaika (a musical instrument) may be the key to the song's success. Or perhaps its success is due to its subject of everlasting love and fidelity.

IKH HOB DIKH TSU FIL LIB

One of the most popular Yiddish "Schlagers" (popular songs) IKH HOB DIKH TSU FIL LIB was written for the musical comedy "Organ Grinder." Its premiere took place in New York City in 1933. Khaim Tauber (1901–1972), the playwright, actor and poet, wrote the words to the songs, and Alexander Olshanetskiy (1892–1946), the distinguished composer and director, wrote the music.

It was sung by one of the stars of Yiddish theatre, Luba Kadiison (1906–2006). She played the young gipsy fortuneteller, Masha, who falls in love with a gipsy organ grinder, Abrasha. But Abrasha is in love with a Jewish girl. Due to her fortune-telling skills, Masha knows that she won't be together with Abrasha, but she does

not know that Abrasha isn't a gipsy after all; instead, he is the Jewish grandson of an honored Hassidic rabbi.

This song was sung in English and many other languages, and was even incorporated into the repertoire of non-Jewish celebrities, such as Ella Fitzgerald and Dean Martin.

Because of the Russian Revolution, and the split between the Reds and the Whites, Alexander Olshanetskiy was forced, in 1922, to travel to Harbin, China, where he served as the bandmaster of the "White Regiment." He traveled around China, Japan and India before arriving in the United States, where he went on to achieve great success. His productions include: "Foreign Wife", "Modern Girls", "Gipsy King", "Success in Love", "I want a Child", "Husband Who is Ill", "Everybody Wants to Marry." In addition to his work in theatre, Olshanetskiy also wrote music for radio and two Yiddish films. However, of all of his works, the one song that is the most popular and his best known is IKH HOB DIKH TSU FIL LIB.

HALEVAY

How does one describe one's love in a song? One can describe the physical beauty of one's beloved, "lips like cherries", "teeth like pearls," et cetera. One can speak of how one misses their beloved and looks forward to their meeting once again. These are typical themes in many Yiddish songs.

HALEVAY a Yiddish word from the Aramaic, roughly translated means things one hopes for but are beyond one's power to control. This word is so perfectly expressive that it was retained in the English version of the song sung by the Jewish actor and singer, Moyshe Oysher (1906–1958).

Moyshe Oysher was born into a Bessarabian family, the fifth generation of Cantors. He became the most popular Cantor of his time. However, his career wasn't limited to liturgical music; he also became a famous theatrical actor and star of Yiddish movies in the 1930's.

In 1921 he left Europe with his family because of his father's Cantorial work, and went first to Montreal, then to New York and Philadelphia. In 1935, Moyshe Oysher became Cantor of the Romanian Synagogue in New York City, which at the time was the center of the American

Cantorial world. He continued there for more than ten years, as well as performing in many Jewish resorts in upstate New York.

At the end of the '30s Moyshe Oysher made three movies. Each showcased his singing abilities: "Cantorial Son" (1937) "Jankle, a Blacksmith" (1938) and "City Cantor from Villen" (1940).

MAMELE

The relationship between a Jewish Mother and her children has a special place in Yiddish song and Jewish culture. Many Yiddish poets wrote about their mothers with great tenderness, but also with sadness.

Mitchell Parish (1900–1993) the author of such famous American songs such as "Deep Purple", "One Morning in May", and "Moonlight Serenade" created the lyrics of MAMELE. His real surname was Paleshinskiy and he was born into a Jewish family in Lithuania. He came to America with his parents when he was less than a year old. The music for MAMELE was written by El Goodheart (1905–1955), a radio director, pianist and theatre impresario.

Nowadays these songs may seem too "sugary" (or in Yiddish – schmaltzy). Poverty and anti-Semitism lead to the mass immigration of Jews at the beginning of the 1880's. Many young Jews dreamt of a better life in the USA, Canada, Argentina and other countries, and when they did leave, they often left their parents behind, sometimes forever. In their new lands, many Jews abandoned much of the observance and traditions of their parents; bringing about feelings of guilt and nostalgia for what they left behind. As a result, there emerged very sentimental songs such as MAMELE, which celebrated the sacrifice and bravery of their mothers.

A YIDDISHE MAME

Another famous song A YIDDISHE MAME evokes a similar nostalgia and tenderness, perhaps a painful guilt, because many people felt deep in their hearts that they had abandoned their families.

Jack Jellen (1892–1991) was the author of the lyrics to A YIDDISHE MAME. He was an outstanding composer and songwriter of the Swing and Dixieland era. Born in Poland, he immigrated to America at the age of five. The death of his mother in 1925 inspired the writing of

"A Yiddishe Mame".

Lew Pollack (1895–1946) composed the music; he was an author, singer and pianist. He began his career as a score writer for the film industry in New York, which led him to Hollywood, where the music to this song was composed.

A YIDDISHE MAME is the most translated of all Yiddish songs: "Mein Jidisze Mame" in Polish, "On katseessa Aidin" in Finnish, "Egy Oszhaju Asszony" in Hungarian, "Mi Querida Mama" in Spanish, "La Yiddishe Mama" in French (sung by Charles Aznavour), et cetera.

The first one to sing this song was Sonya Kalish (1887–1966) better known by her stage name Sophie Tucker. Her family emigrated from the Ukraine when she was a child. Before the war, her records, especially the song "A Yiddishe Mame", were very popular in Germany. After Hitler came to power they were forbidden, and many of the recordings destroyed.

TSHIRIBIM

One of the themes of TSHIRIBIM is Purim, which is one of the most joyful Jewish holidays. The holiday celebrates the rescue of the Jews of Ancient Persia from a deadly royal edict. The king's minister, Haman, who hated all the Jews, hatched a plot to persuade the King to have them killed. But the plot was foiled by the beautiful Jewish Queen Esther.

Purim traditions include carnival performances (Purim spiels), mishlot manot (baskets of food containing, among other things, hamentaschen – sweet triangular shaped cookies filled with poppy seeds or jelly) and a large sehuda (meal). The tradition demands that one become so drunk on Purim that one cannot tell the difference between the wicked Haman and the good Mordachi, uncle of Queen Esther.

In the song TSHIRIBIM the game of dreidle is played. A dreidle is a four-sided top which one spins. This is a Hanukkah tradition and not a Purim tradition, but it may be included in the song because of the tradition of overdrinking on Purim, therefore confusing the holidays.

The song is a set of folk rhymes with different subjects and themes; from meals to Hassidic stories about Tzaddik's (a person who has

attained a great level of holiness) that are joined by repeated music and a joyful refrain with the senseless word TSHIRIBIM.

Spanning the 1770's to the 1880's, there appeared what came to be known as the 'Haskalah movement,' an intellectual movement among the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, which advocated integration of the Jews into their surrounding societies, encouraging, among other things, the adoption of local vernaculars and secular studies. This movement was responsible for a Jewish cultural revival, manifested mainly in the creation of modern Hebrew literature.

Another theme of TSHIRIBIM is mocking the Hassidic belief in a Tzaddik and their ability to create miracles. There are many satirical songs and literary works of Jewish authors from this period where Tzaddik's are claimed to be cynical charlatans, fanatics, or even insane. The aim of such works was to encourage Jews to strive for a secular education and rational thinking.

Generally, TSHIRIBIM is an example of cheerful and even frivolous Yiddish songs. In addition to humor, there is a sense of triumph over the dangers of life as told in the story of Purim.

SHLOYMELE

SHLOYMELE was written by Joseph Rumshinskiy (1881–1956), who was born in Vilnius, the son of a hat maker and singing teacher. In the late 1800s, Vilnius was known as the "Lithuanian Jerusalem," and considered one of the most important centers of Jewish culture in the world.

As a child, Rumshinskiy sang in a choir in one of the most important synagogues of "Lithuanian Jerusalem." Together with the famous theatre troop of the Kaminskis, he participated in performances of many of Abraham Goldfaden's compositions. When Rumshinskiy was seventeen he became the director of Goldfaden's opera "Bar-Kohba."

In 1904 he came to America and settled in Boston, where he found a job in the Hope Theatre. Within a few years, he was in New York again. Rumshinskiy worked at many theatres: Windsor Theatre, Yiddish Art Theatre, Second Avenue Theatre, Kessler's People's Theatre, and also worked in Yiddish radio. He wrote hundreds of operettas as well as liturgical compositions.

SHLOYMELE is a duet from the operetta "The Little Rabbi from

Galicia," (1937). It is a typical example of Yiddish songs of the time; the dialogue of a man and woman in waltz rhythm. It embodies a common theme of Yiddish theatre, the belief that each man and woman has his or her own "bashert" (soul mate). The song demonstrates there are many obstacles on the path to finding your other half. Nevertheless, one can be hopeful that there is love awaiting you somewhere, either in your Motherland or abroad.

In this operetta, a young boy comes to the house of a Hassidic Rabbi and claims he is Shloymele, the Rabbi's son, who died long ago in a shipwreck. Soon this would-be "rabbile" (diminutive form of a Rabbi) falls in love with the Hassidic Rabbi's daughter. As it goes in all light operettas, there is a happy ending. The real Shloymele returns, accompanied by the Gypsies who rescued him, which means his sister may now speak about her love freely.

LOMIR ALE IN EYNEM

This is the most popular wedding song in Yiddish culture and is comparable to the song "Happy Birthday," which is known all over the world. In both cases, you insert into the lyrics names of people in order to greet or congratulate them. Both melodies are simple, and the words of the song are repeated, so it is easy to learn and sing in chorus.

Taking into account the improvisational structure of this song, its couplets are almost unlimited. It is possible to greet the bride and groom and their parents, and also their matchmaker and Rabbi, as well as any other guest, just by inserting their names.

For Jews, the physical and spiritual union of two people is the foundation of a nation's existence. That's why the Biblical injunction to "go forth and multiply" is not taken lightly by observant Jews. It is perhaps the most important of the religious commandments.

FREYLEKHS

FREYLEKHS is the only example, among the songs on this CD, of a Soviet Jewish musical work. The world it depicts is a utopian paradise of Soviet Jewry.

The song is sometimes named "Birobidzhan Freylekhs."

Birobidzhan is a region established by the Soviet authorities in 1934. It is the center of what came to be known as JAR (Jewish Autonomous Region), and aside from Israel, is the world's only Jewish territory with an official status.

It was established as a result of the Soviet nationality policy, under Stalin, which provided the Jewish population of the Soviet Union with a territory in which to pursue their Yiddish cultural heritage.

Jewish communists (including Americans and Europeans) were pleased with the development of Birobidzhan, calling it the communist alternative to "clerical and nationalistic" Zionism. In time, a harsh climate, insufficient economic support, and ideological oppression resulted in the loss of interest in this project.

Also, there was an inherent contradiction in the concept of the Birobidzhan project; the Soviet government's suspicion of any expression of national culture. Such expression could be declared nationalistic or chauvinistic, and therefore not in keeping with Soviet standards of harmony among the different nationalities. The idea was to build a new man, a Soviet man. This accounts for why in the song FREYLEKHS there is no reference to "Jew" or "Jewish" (although there are references to non-Jewish Circassians).

FREYLEKHS (meaning "cheerful" in Yiddish) is one of the most popular songs among the traditional forms of Klezmer music. There are many variations of FREYLEKHS, both in major and in minor keys, but intense dance rhythm is what unites them all. In Russia, the most popular version is "Seven-forty."

Easy Charik (1898–1937), a Byelorussian and Jewish poet, was the son of a shoemaker and the grandson of a "badchen" (the Yiddish name for the traditional wedding "jester," the comedian with scholarly overtones). He believed in communism and was a strong supporter of the Bolshevik victory. He began writing his poems during the Russian Revolution. They glorified the Soviet system and Stalin's project, the JAR (Jewish Autonomous Region), in Birobidzhan. During the great purge of 1937, Easy Charik, like many of his contemporaries, was accused of flawed ideology, and was murdered by the communists.

Motl Polyansky (1910/1913- 2008), composer, was born in Bessarabia. He was imprisoned in a Jewish ghetto in 1941 in the Ukrainian town of Shargorod, which was occupied by the Germans. The Ghetto was handed over to pro-Nazi Rumania. Almost all his family died in the

Holocaust, but he survived Hitler, Stalin, and even the Soviet regime. The last two decades of his long life were spent in Israel, where he continued his work as a musician.

VIGLID

The “cradlesong” is one of the most popular categories of Jewish songs. Many Russians know at least one Yiddish cradlesong – particularly the one that was sung in the old Soviet film “Circus” by the great Jewish actor Solomon Michoels. Under Stalin’s orders, Solomon was later murdered in Minsk. The murder of Michoels is considered a major turning point in the history of Soviet Jewry, marking the transition to a policy of official anti-Semitism. His death was followed by the arrest of leading Jewish figures and the closure of most Jewish institutions.

Many Jewish cradlesongs are very sad, and when you listen to them you think, “This baby is so lucky not to understand his mother’s words.”

One of the few cradlesongs written by Abraham Goldfaden has does not have any specific name; it is entitled just VIGLID (“Cradlesong”). In the melody we see the influence of the famous M.Ju. Lermontov’s “Cossack Cradlesong.” It is said that Lermontov was inspired by a folksong, sung to him by an unknown Cossack woman. We know that in the following years more than 50 composers, including A. Varlamov (1842), A. Grechanin (1894) and A. Taneev (1899) wrote music for this song.

This short song does not give a complete picture of Abraham Goldfaden’s (1840–1908) works. The watchmaker’s son from Starokonstantinov, Ukraine, Goldfaden is justifiably considered to be “the father of Jewish theatre.” He wrote about sixty operettas, including “Shmendrik” (“Sorry Little Fellow”, 1877), “Di Kischeff-machern” (“The Witch”, 1879) and “Bar-Kochba” (1882), but above all he created the first professional Yiddish troop.

Goldfaden and his actors had to overcome many obstacles; from the inability of their audience to buy tickets, to the prohibition of the Yiddish language in theaters after the murder of the Emperor Alexander II. These forced the Goldfaden troop to perform “bi-performances,” where they would pretend to be speaking in German, but were actually speaking in Yiddish. Thanks to the similarity of the

languages, along with bribes to the local officials, they were able to perform in Yiddish. For a variety of reasons they also faced opposition from many orthodox leaders and representatives of Jewish communities.

Despite these obstacles, Goldfaden achieved his goals, and thanks to him, Yiddish theatre became one of the most important aspects of Jewish cultural life. Following the example of his traveling theatre, new troops were formed in both Eastern Europe and America, where Yiddish theatre found its greatest expression and diversity.