

Interviews with Cantors by Mark Slobin
Transcribed by Amanda Scherbenske in June 2009

Slobin (hereafter S): Sure.

M Silverman: It reminds me that that's the kind of a hazzan I am. Very few hazzanim today can improvise, very, very few.

S: You can't teach it in the schools.

MS: No you can't. That's something that you've got in your gut and in your heart and that came from childhood on. As I'm talking to you I'm remembering when I was just about 11.5/12 years old, our home was a home that was filled with hazzanim all the time. And they were always singing. They were always singing. And at one time I said to my father, I said 'pop, I can sing something, improvising.' He looked up at me and said 'go ahead.' And I remember it was XXX *tsur yisroel, kol beys yisroel*. And he looked up at me in utter amazement—12 years old. That was my first test in improvisation and I had his approval. Before then when I davened mayriv with orchestra and choir everything was written for me. I wouldn't chance it. But that one time I had the courage to say 'I can do it' and he let me.

S: *Tsur yisroel* particularly—everybody does the same tune.

MS: The most important thing is, if you want to improvise—go ahead. But make sure you get back into the track of nusach.

S: And it doesn't matter where you go when you improvise, right?

MS: No, IF you understand the ??? (or parish XXX) *peyrush hamelos*. And you don't make a big tsimmes out of sasson v'simcha and start bawling—at the word sasson v'simcha.

S: When you're doing that, are you then consciously working with the text, portraying the text.

MS: Oh yeah.

S: Is that the heart of improvisation is the text?

MS: ABSOLUTELY. You must never disregard the text, no way. When I started out on the v'al kulom I chose to start out in a major key, because we're talking about praising the name of god, and then gradually working into a minor motif of a V'kol hakhayim yodukha selah and when I came to the words of ezrateynu ezrateynu I went into a minor motif and by the time I did it I modulated back to the freygish so that by the time I came to the brokha I was singing in a freygish motif, and I ended the hatofim khona khalados with a hatofimXX with a little lidl, then with a sakha ending as they call it. But, I was in the nusach.

S: Which is freygish?

MS: Freygish.

S: That really interests me. That question of how conscious people are, but you're very conscious of it.

MS: Oh yes. Well I think that's the training of a hazzan who's been in the pulpit for over 50 years.

S: Do you feel that those always go together, because freygish can have different kinds of texts.

MS: That's true.

S: Or is it mood for it?

MS: There is a mood, but I think it's based on the text.

S: But not all the freygish texts are the same mood or are they, I don't know?

MS: They could be, but not necessarily.

S: So what makes it—that association of motif and text is really illusive to me still.

MS: I don't understand your question.

S: What is the mood of freygish in that prayer as far as you're concerned, what mood is it expressing—the freygish?

MS: The shabbos nusach *sings* $1^2+3^45^654^3+2^1$. You know you can use that too, sometimes in the vokhadike davening, sometimes in the shakhris, but it's still differs in a way because the vokhadike davening something very simple, very glot, without any fanfare. The shabbos davening has a little more oomph to it. I guess that's about the best way I can explain it.

S: But it's still in freygish.

MS: That's right, it still remains in freygish.

S: So that's what I'm trying to understand is what is the essence of the freygish, is it only that it's shabbos so the freygish takes on a certain character, or does freygish create the character, the mood.

MS: I think the shabbos creates the mood more so than the freygish. The shabbos creates the mood.

S: Are there some occasions where—well on the other hand you say when you go into a certain description then you want a certain—how do you make those choices? The major, is the major always happy, or is the major rejoicing?

MS: The major is not only happy. The major can be a majestic sound without the kvetch and the kneytch. That's the difference. And then when you go into freygish you can see the difference. But the major not necessarily for only a lidl, NO, you can sing a lidl in a freygish too. But the major is more for majesty. Majesty! And everything doesn't have to be freygish and everything doesn't have to be minor, if you go according to the text of the *peyrush hamelos*. Now for example, I can sing a hallel and I may differ from a lot of my colleagues. I can start a haleyl in major—*barukh atah adonay eloheynu melekh ha'olum, asher kidishanu b'mitz'votav v'tzivanu*. Up to that point, I can sing in the major, I can start in G major, go up to C major, and come back to g minor—wind up the haleyl in a minor motif as it should be done. But there's nothing that can keep me from starting in the major, going into a minor, and winding up as I do. For example *sings barukh atah...* not doing the monotonous minor all the way through. You have a major, then you have a minor, but you're ending up in the minor.

S: That's beautiful. Is the hallel always the same or depends on what occasion you're singing hallel?

MS: I don't have any other occasion to sing it other than on shabbos. Vokhadik I'm not.

S: It wouldn't be different for rosh hodesh?

MS: No. And I vary that too. I can start off, [he] gives me G, D, G *sings barukh*. How do I do that? *Sings barukh atah adoshem. Eluheyenu meylekh. Ha o'lam melekh...* and then I go through the major motif a sher kichanem and then the minor motif and I always wind up with this one thing that I think is so typical of *ale—sings a tsivanu (5-1)*. And then *sings* likarodu, likaro...and these are vistas that I seek all the time. I have to do it for me more than for them.

S: Oh seriously? Sure.

MS: and that's the way it works.

S: Being a musician you have to satisfy yourself.

MS: Absolutely. And my organist is superb, he never anticipates me, but waits to see where I'm going and before he comes in with his chords. Otherwise he plays in unison. He wants to know where I'm going. And sometimes I have to figure out where the hell I'm going myself.

S: Does having an organ limit you in some way?

MS: NO. No way. When this man came to me didn't have the faintest idea as to how to accompany khazanut.

S: Is he Jewish?

MS: Oh yes. I taught him. And now he is absolutely magnificent. My wife can attest to that because she listens to us occasionally.

S: And the choir are professional?

S: Now when you do improvisation—I was just talking about that to Mo Silverman—what do you think is the essence of improvisation?

IP: The neshome, the heart strings and the neshome, it's gotta be a combination. Look, when you're in the pulpit as long as I am—this is my 38th year in the pulpit—as a professional hazzan, but remember, I started already davening in the pulpit when I was 13. So when you're in it that long, and I'll be 60 in June, it's second nature. If you're looking at the tfillah itself, it depends upon what your feeling is.

S: It's your relationship to the text itself?

IP: And the nusach.

S: But you can move around a little?

IP: Oh sure, I move around a lot but I always come back.

S: So the coming back is the essence of the nusach, basically.

IP: For instance if I'll do a hashkiveynu on Friday night—depending upon what my emotions are and if I'm emotionally involved—if I'm doing not a prepared piece with the choir and organ. But my congregation likes on Friday night in spite of the fact that we use an organ and a choir, every once in a while for me to do hashkiveynu improvised.

S: So you start where? What's nusach then, it's the Friday night, right?

IP: Not necessarily, I'll come back once I hit U-sh.mor tzey-teynu L.ha-yimu-l.shalom ...then I'll come back. *Sings*. Then I'll stay in the nusach to complete it.

Prior to that I'll do whatever I want.

S: But do you start there too, no you start anywhere you want?

IP: I can start anywhere I want.

S: So it's really the conclusion, it's not the beginning.

IP: Yes, of course, because you've got to bring them back into the Shabbos-mode, ready for v'shamru or khatzi Kaddish, whatever you're gonna do.

S: Now how do you decide where to wander?

IP: If you're talking about improvisation, it's not a decision. It's improvisation—I can't give you an answer like that.

S: But if you think about it now, do you follow the text, expressing the words?

IP: Oh YES.

S: You automatically shift to the appropriate expression...

IP: Yes, hashkiveynu to me, this great prayer for peace and to take away *oyev, dever, v.herev, v.ra-av* I have no difficulty with that now. I have all I can do but to stop from breaking down. When I look at the news pictures on television and I see these little African children, oh I have no trouble tearing my heart out.

S: So which musical expression is best for that? I mean I'm just sort of being technical here, but I'm curious is that in *ahava raba*, when you feel that way?

IP: Yes.

S: Or is it...

IP: I would say so more than anything else. Of course it's a minor, heart-rendering. But you see in the minor, as I've learned, a minor is not necessarily a heart-breaking because there's no end to it.

S: Certainly not in the Jewish tradition.

IP: It's optimistic. You're going to be able to go on from there.

S: What about the *freygish*?

IP: It depends upon what I'm doing. Not in the *hashkiveynu*, I don't think so. But I don't stop and evaluate it. I don't think modes until I get to where I'm going to end to come back. I don't think modes at all, I know that I don't. I interpret the prayers *Hashkiveynu Adonai Eloheyinu l.shalom, V.ha-amideynu Mal-keynu l.ha-yim* and I've explained it to classes and everything else. It calls us to lie down, to go to sleep. We are as close to death as any other time in our life—we have no control over anything. Whatever is gonna happen happens. We're not in a thinking stage at the time. And *hashkiveynu* calls us all to lie down, *l'shalom*, in peace. You know, not rest in peace, but in peace, real *shalom*. And without catching a breath, *V.ha-amideynu*, but calls us to rise up again. To what? To life. Because it's almost like suspended animation, it's almost like we're in death.

S: Do you improvise?

IW: Yes, I'm a great improviser.

S: What do you think is the essence of improvisation?

IW: You have to know what you're doing. And you have to have a certain limitation. You can't overstep, because once you overstep you're boring. It doesn't mean anything. You have to put it in such a way that *tfillah* means something to the congregation. I know when I'm affective. When I don't hear a sound in *shul*, then I know that I'm affective. I

never listen for that, by the way, because my mind is completely taken up with what I'm doing.

S: So it's in a sense rhetorical, oratory, almost. Which gets me to the question of the language of that sort of thing, what are the actual gestures and instead of language of this, now if you've got a specific item and you've got the nusach of that time how do you go about then improvising on that?

IW: I enhance a little bit of the nusach. That doesn't mean that I do everything in improvisation. I do things that were written by other composers, too.

S: Right, but if you're doing your own?

IW: If I'm doing my own I will think about it during the week.

S: So you'll plan ahead?

IW: I plan ahead, yes.

S: Where you want to do something in the nusach.

IW: That's right.

S: Where would do this, say on a Saturday or a Friday night?

IW: Saturday morning XXXshmey a k'dusha a'varakha... The torah service is a set service, it's either one composer or another composer.

S: So if you were doing this in the k'dusha you would, again because that's a place where there's something really key to get across? Is that why you do it there? How do you pick those places where you want to have your own statement?

IW: If the prayer speaks to me. If the liturgical piece speaks to me, then it gives me a message that maybe I can involve myself a little more in it. Like ???mosay timalokhbasim. So maybe I'll say it more than once, but sort of bring it up to a crisis some how or another.

S: You would start in what mode then?

IW: Well the k'dusha is free-style, by the way. But we have a certain mode that we'll go in. Do you want to hear an example? *Sings*. I don't like to krikh at the glakhevint. I do it galasn. *Sings*. It's a development that I grew up with, it's part of me.

S: Is there a specific relationship. It starts kind of in freygish and eventually gets to a kind of major

IW: I can even go to a minor with veyareynu makheseke

S: Is that because minor has specific meaning—that those words go with that? Minor, why not major?

IW: Not really. It's just that if I can improvise and I come into a minor key for a while because I can accomplish what I want to accomplish and then go back again to the freygish—that's ok too.

S: So there isn't the pairing of words to modes?

IW: No. There is, like the tiskadal v'tiskadash, yes. But I do it naturally. I just do it because it's part of me. But when I take a composition in hand I make sure that these things are there, so I shouldn't go away from the so-called tradition, and of course the misinayXXX, so to speak.

S: So I guess I am curious about that notion of the pairing-up. Does it just happen to be the case that Saturday morning that is a freygish sound, or is that just because it's traditional for no particular reason or do you think there is a musical relationship between the mood and the particular mode?

IW: There has to be a mood that I can build up with either one or another. And if I can build up the mood somehow or another I can change, I have the right to in the middle somehow or another but come back again to the original, come back with vim l'hashem to follow in the nusach.

S: There you would come back. So the ending is very important?

IW: The ending is something that has to give you the feeling that you're not going to start nusach afterwards, in a different room. So you have to lead into it somehow so that the transition goes right into the nusach.

S: That's interesting. These technical aspects, really fascinate me. It's a kind of craft of doing these things. Do you think they're younger people that know how to do this at all?

IW: I would suggest that when a younger person becomes a hazzan that he should be very careful in improvisation until he learns the basics. Once he learns basics then of course he can go into other things. You're either born with that or you don't have it.

S: Do you think there are young people who can do it?

IW: Yes. There are a number of young people who can do it. But they have to be born in it.

S: You can't learn it.

IW: You can't all of a sudden come into the tradition as a hazzan from a different element completely, from a different environment and expect that. Just as you can't have a composer write a mayriv service for you if he's not with the nusach ha tfillah for that service.

S: ...ask you about music a little bit. Your philosophy of music, especially you're a great expert in improvisation and that sort of thing. I've been trying to understand how it works a little bit, the idea of improvising and the idea of nusach and some of these...

DK: How do you define improvisation?

S: How do you define it, that the...

DK: No, I'll tell you. But I have many people—khazanut—when they get into that ecstasy, they call it improvisation. Improvisation to my estimation [they] pick up a page in the siddur and they start singing something that they've never done before. You are just reading the words and according to the meaning of the word you're trying to interpret the word.

S: Text first.

DK: Of course. It's not just putting in a melody, it has to have a meaning. If you understand the words, try to put it over, try to the listener. You should know what you are talking about. That's improvisation. And of course, improvisation doesn't come suddenly. Improvisation is something that you have to develop and your mind has to work because you start on a key and you've got to be where you are and when you start improvising you can wander off somewhere and never find yourself to get back to the original key. So you have to work. You have to have the picture of the music in front of you, the notes, how you are working it. Some do it, but they never get back to the original key.

S: The important part is to get back? It doesn't matter where you start.

DK: Yeah. You can do this, but you have to wind yourself back. Not just a sudden change from one key to the other you have to slide into it, it shouldn't be noticed that are there in a different key, and changing into a major and this and the other, according to the

word. I would change into a major where it doesn't require a simcha or something like this. If the word requires more solemnity you have to apply the music accordingly. If suddenly it brightens up, so you do something in a major, phrases, all you put phrases and then you wind back. Wind back so you don't get lost.

S: so you arrive back in the nusach?

DK: Of course, it's all within the nusach. But when you start branching off

S: Yeah, then it's not in the nusach anymore

DK: No. But it's relative. And then you wind yourself back and suddenly the choir hears me already, I am there and they answer a word already.

S: Ah-hu. Give me an example of hashkiveynu on a Friday night. How would you start, where would you start it? In minor?

DK: Well it all depends. You can either, you can start in if you know the term ahava raba, in the ahava raba mode, like for weekday services, it's more suitable. Weekday services are in that mode. Friday night is more minor. But you develop—you get into all kind of

S: So how do you decide as you go along?

DK: I can also, even in weekday I could start in a minor, but then I wind myself into the mode—right into the weekday mode.

S: So if you started Friday night in a minor where would you go next?

DK: You start on a minor, you get in a IV, from C-F, you know? And you phrase as you go along. And then you get into a IV minor, say into B flat.

S: What words would you, because the words change?

DK: Not because the words. If you want a phrase you don't want to make it too monotonous. So you stay on the IV and you phrase along there and then you want to go back—see like *sings hashkiveynu*. You're in the major, but I'm still in the mode because the major is the A flat major to the F minor. The A flat is the relative major so I am within the same.

S: But when you changed to the major it's because the words demand it? Because you're saying something different?

DK: Yes. U-f.ros aleynu sukkat sh.lomekha

S: And that's more suitable for major?

DK: Of course.

S: The major is more majestic...

DK: More.

S: And then from there where would you go? You're already up in A flat?

DK: From A flat major then I wind myself back to the F. And from there I play around *sings*, back on the B flat *sings*, back in the F, *sings*, back on the B flat.

S: But you wouldn't go into a freygish?

DK: Yes.

S: Where would you do that?

DK: *Sings* I'm already in freygish.

S: Which text is that better for?

DK: V.hageyn ba-adeynu you can do in either.

S: In either freygish or minor. Does the freygish have a particular meaning, sense to it?

DK: Well that's the nusach, the Shabbos morning and even the weekday service Shakhres is also freygish.

S: Does it have a particular emotional quality, freygish?

DK: It does have something *sings*. I don't know the term for it in the secular music, Phrygian or something like this. I would say even eastern *sings*. You hear sometimes in the Arabs or something.

S: So what's the feeling of that then? It's not sad. I'm just wondering whether it has a particular emotional context.

DK: Well it's a certain nusach. It's a certain mode for a part of services but you can use it everywhere as long as you wind back to the original. Because you can't stay on the same minor all the time, even if you go already a fourth higher and you're on the B flat minor—it's again minor.

DK's wife (?): It has to be colorful.

DK: You see you have to play around v.ha-seyr satan mil-fa-neynu (*speaks*). I get into a major. *Sings* v.ha-seyr satan mil-fa-neynu—now that's a major. V.ha-seyr satan in English would push away the satan from us *sings*. It's a major, so now I was in F minor, then B flat minor, and now I'm in D flat major. And it's all relative (?), all of the same key.

S: Let's say in the Shabbos morning, do you think of an overall kind of dramatic quality to the whole service, do you think of it having a dramatic curve?

DK: Yes.

S: Where is the high point?

DK: Let's take, for instance, abi kol razh godar *sings*, I am in freygish. Now here I can do what I want *sings* "abi kol razh godar". It's major—razh godar. Or if I want to change the key. *Sings* I'm in D flat major *sings*—you know the meaning? And then I wind myself back *sings*. I'm back to the F, freygish. But you have to think, you can't just play around and get lost.

S: Who in your memory—you've heard so many great khazonim--who were the best ones at improvising?

DK: (to his wife) Shall I him the truth? I haven't heard any.

DK's wife: He's the expert.

S: Really?

DK: My only khazonim is XXX

S: Getting back to improvisation, where do you do it?

Henry Rosenbloom: I have sat with the organist and tried to explain the modes to him.

Being a good recitalist and a church organist he wants everything written out.

S: So he's not Jewish?

HR: He's not Jewish. That's another story. I'll talk to you about the faith of the choir and organist, if you care. He would like to know just where I'm gonna go, harmonically, so that he can follow me and I say 'George, do me a favor, let me go and when you hear me coming to a new place you can come and join me again. He has not quite mastered that yet but occasionally I'll say 'George, I'm gonna daven hashkiveynu in A minor tonight. I'll move around a but you'll find me, I promise, just come with me. And he's willing to take a chance occasionally. Shabbat morning is all improvisation. I say 'E freygish' and he knows the types of modulations that I use and I say 'you follow me' and he's comfortable Sat. morning, not as much Fri. night. And since we do more performance-

type things on Fri. night, it's not critical. I'm willing to leave it more written music and set pieces.

S: Let's say the hashkiveynu, how do you go about improvising on it? You do it differently every time, if you're improvising?

HR: Usually Fri. night I do set pieces, but were I to do something I would say to him that I begin in E minor or that I begin in A minor

S: But you've got to begin in minor?

HR: I would usually begin hashkiveynu in minor.

S: Because it's the Fri. nusach?

HR: Yeah, but see hashkiveynu is free. Nusachically is that ultimately what counts is the khatima, the conclusion.

S: So it's where you end.

HR: That's correct. Hashkiveynu is one of those free prayers. Traditionally it was started in minor and when you came to the section V.hageyn ba-adeynu, you would move into the freygish there, usually on the fourth step.

S: Why?

HR: That's the oral tradition.

S: Well I'm asking why because—do you feel there's a connection between those musical things and semantic?

HR: I think that in the eastern European plaintive tradition, V.hageyn ba-adeynu—defend us, plea for us—they used ahava raba as the mode of

S: Of supplication

HR: Yes, more so than minor.

S: More so than freygish, say for that too?

HR: Freygish and ahava raba is the same. When you went into the freygish that was your plaintive mode.

S: Do you still feel that way? Do you follow that kind of a modal sense?

HR: Do I follow it intellectually or do I follow it because...

S: When you feel like being plaintive, is that what you turn to? Do you feel that those things are still relevant in some way?

HR: I think I feel it relevant in terms of a historical connection, in terms of my own emotional or aesthetic connection, I don't think that the mode really makes the difference. To my way of thinking, it's the way one uses the voice, and how you interpret the meaning of the text. And I'm not convinced it has to be the mode that will convey that.

S: So there are a number of independent variables?

HR: Ah-hm.

S: You can combine the voice with the mode with certain texts. But they don't teach you how to use your voice ever, do they?

HR: That you're supposed to study privately.

S: That you're supposed to know yourself.

HR: Or study privately and hopefully learn

S: Well if you study privately you don't study with a hazn, you study with a voice teacher.

HR: No, ideally you study—for example, there's an eastern European tradition that when you chant mimkomkha on Sat. morning, you start in the ahava raba, and then when you come to matay timlokh you go to fourth step minor XXXX you go to the relative major and then you work your way back. That's a traditional move that you make, khazonically. And if you're in a shul and the people know what you're doing, you finish the first phrase, they're all gonna start to give you the XXX (hum now) for the fourth step minor. And when you finish that fourth step minor you navigate to the relative major, they're right there with you. If you were to take that same pattern and pre-determine that you're gonna use that in hashkiveynu, it could work, with no difficulty. But it doesn't necessarily give you the meaning of the text and I think if you let the words be the things that lead you, you'll wind up choosing a music that's appropriate. And I think once you get away from the very right-wing congregation you can have the freedom to do that. There's an expectation in the shuls in Toronto, in some of the other areas that they expect 'give me the old-time khazones. You don't have to be subtle with me, give me what I want to hear.'

S: And they'll expect that in a certain kind of sequence.

HR: Yes they will.

S: Then it's not improvisation at all, then it's an understood set piece.

HR: It becomes a set piece—the improvisation is in that framework—how many dreydlakh can you give me, can you drive me crazy with that?

S: So now we've got another variable which is ornament,

HR: ornamentation

S: which they also don't teach you, or which you can't really get from a singing teacher either because it's not bel canto, unless you're doing bel canto. Or do you?

HR: I think that if you sing properly, being facile you can do any type of coloration that you want or any type of ornamentation. However, the ornamentation may not sound like khazones. It may be more like Mozart or Rossini.

S: Right, this was the norm 75 years ago.

HR: That's correct. And I think what we find in today's American congregations are that those people who either grew up in very traditional congregations or have spent endless hours listening to records have acquired a certain style. Those of us who were influenced by youth congregations that didn't have a cantor or by ???Ramouesh, didn't have cantor, or by the Cantor's Institute, which does not push that old style, now daven in the American style, which is much cleaner, much less coloratura. If you look at the music that Alter wrote, it's very clean. If he actually has a run of 5 or 6 notes that's a lot, but none of the chicken-scrrawl that goes for about four or five bars.

S: Could you give me an example of the same thing both ways?

HR: For example, I'm much more comfortable in the American style but I can do some of the other. Let me find a phrase that will work. Let's say I was davening hashkiveynu *sings*. This type of sound is the more contemporary, American style. The older type *sings*. My congregation, I'll talk about that because I have a...