

Music in the Yiddish Theater and Cinema, 1880-1950

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Early Formation of the Music

The Yiddish theater and its offspring, the Yiddish-language film, flourished as modern urban entertainment genres in a short historic period, from the 1870s through the 1940s, declining sharply thereafter. It was a popular theater form that, like parallel non-Jewish media systems of its time, relied very heavily on music, alongside drama and comedy, to divert, instruct, and sometimes to arouse a working-class audience. More so than many other audiences, Jews were often in a situation of extreme economic, social, and political pressure at a time of massive modernization that involved widespread emigration, immigration, and discrimination.

The historic tidal wave that struck this entertainment system doomed the enterprise: the end of mass immigration to the US, wartime destruction of a shared transatlantic cultural space with Europe, the creation of the State of Israel as a shift of focus, and the widespread integration of North American Jewry into mainstream popular culture. It survives as remnants, nostalgic or ironic musical materials woven into new formats for successive generations of Jewish revivalists and non-Jewish cultural tourists attracted to the rich material of the golden age of Yiddish dramatic arts. A handful of songs, not reams of stilted dialogue or the performances of great actors and actresses, have endured, reappearing as part of “klezmer,” in Yiddish language training programs, or in printed and online songbooks, reference works, and blogs. Reconstruction and pastiche versions of theatrical material began in the 1970s and continue to offer current audiences some sense of this rich tradition.

Like so many streams of modern Jewish life, music of the Yiddish theater and cinema needs to be seen in at least four dimensions: 1) as the organic outgrowth of pre- and early-modern Jewish expressive culture; 2) as an adaptation of co-territorial European and American performing arts genres, practices, and materials; 3) as a multiply-sited Yiddish-culture form that featured both wide transnational circulation and strong regional variation; 4) as a product of the newly-emerging media of modernity, from sheet music and sound recording to radio and motion pictures.

Taking the background first, it is common to say that Yiddish theater grew out of the *purimshpil* tradition, a once-a-year relaxation of rabbinic rules that allowed for a carnivalesque popular exposition of repressed parody and irreverence.¹ Door-to-door troupes demanded access to homes and handouts, in return for skits and songs nominally based on biblical stories, including the Esther theme of the Purim holiday. The plots featured cross-dressing, heavy-handed humor, and topical satire about issues and character-types of the day

under the cover of seasonal Jewish expression. But much more of Jewish life than the *purimshpil* was distinctively performative, even choreographed. Women's chanting of *got fun avrom* at twilight as the Sabbath departed,² the swinging of a chicken over a man's head while chanting a scriptural passage, in performance of the *kapores* ritual before Yom Kippur, the knocking on the window of the synagogue assistant chanting *am koydesh* to rouse men to prayer³—these and many other dramatized embodiments of ritual obligations, all based on melodic intonation, were precursors of more formal stagings. Explicit and self-consciously theatrical songs and satire were the specialty of the *badkhn*, a master of ceremonies at weddings, who was in league with hereditary instrumentalists, *klezmer* musicians, to set the mood for the ritualized celebration that was a major set-piece of personal transition and communal solidarity. The linkage between the theatricality of everyday Jewish life and the evolution of modern forms of drama and cinema is not arbitrary. Plays, and eventually movies, continually drew on this wellspring of well-known gestures and sounds to create a flow of credibility and emotion between the creators and receivers of popular theater.

As the east European Jews grew increasingly urbanized, their ears opened to the emerging soundscapes around them. The increased regional mobility offered by rail travel and the transatlantic passage of populations allowed for the development of new tastes and the influence of a whole range of musical inputs. The wandering players collectively called the *broder-zinger* (named for the crossroads city of Brod) had their ears open. Opera, but more particularly its younger sister operetta, infiltrated the cities and towns in various national forms. As the birth of the Yiddish theater is usually located in Moldavia, it is worth noting the figure of Ciprian Porumbescu (1853-83), whose ears and ambitions parallel those of the founders the parallel Jewish system he influenced: “as a student at the Vienna Musical Conservatory, Porumbescu noted with great interest the success of operettas by [Strauss](#), [Suppé](#), [Offenbach](#) and others. His supreme goal was to replace the frivolity of subject-matter in the fashionable operettas with a plot that revived old Romanian traditions.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciprian_Porumbescu) Here we see the ways that mainstream European performing arts trickled out to the East through locally available intermediaries that Jewish musicians—singers, actors, composers—could use as models. The founders of Yiddish theater and its music absorbed all these influences, as is evident from their memoirs. Above all, Abraham Goldfaden, “the father of the Yiddish theater,” aspired to building a respectable “national” drama in Yiddish along Porumbescu's lines, even as he assimilated that wildly eclectic singing and theatrical resources of his ragtag group of actors and musicians. Boris Thomashefsky, the domineering actor-producer of New York, also sang, as did so many actors of the early Yiddish stage, the line between the two skills being thin at best. In his memoir, he relates how he began in boyhood as a cantorial choirboy (*meshoyrer*), but was advised by the Italian music director of the Kiev Opera to do opera-house training. Another choirboy, Sigmund Mogulesco (1858-1914), who wrote some of the most important early songs while being famous for his comedic genius as “the Jewish Charlie

Chaplin,” recalled his patchy, patchwork musical upbringing via Jewish sacred and non-Jewish mainstream entertainment. Joseph Rumshinsky (1881-1951), the great professionalizer of Yiddish musical theater, tells of writing marches and waltzes for the provincial Russian military garrison in his hometown, a formative phase of his early career training.

The growth of city amusements such as wine cellars, beer gardens, and cabaret made it possible for newer ethnic formats to thrive. The birth of Yiddish theater is pegged at 1876 and located in a wine-garden in Iasi, Moldavia, at a time when Jewish contractors had leisure and money while serving as military contractors during the Russo-Turkish war. Slowly these slapdash attempts at modern entertainment grew into more mainstream popular theater venues and genres. The musical tastes and impulse of the early founders transferred almost immediately from Romania and Ukraine to New York with the enormous wave of emigration of the 1880s, eventually spreading to all immigrant enclaves, from Capetown to Buenos Aires to Melbourne. Linking the older and more modern styles, as well as several continents, was the sense of improvisation, transience of material, eclecticism of sources, and the blending of pathos, pratfalls, and sweet melodies.

In many ways, this profile of the Yiddish theater fits squarely into the cross-cultural heading “popular theater,” as Joel Schechter describes it: “Popular theatre forms lend themselves to adaptation, reinterpretation and changes of content because they originate in unwritten and improvised performance traditions.” And, tellingly, “popular theatre performers who depend on the audience for support also usually speak for the audience by voicing its social concerns.”⁴As in many world popular theater traditions, from Europe to Africa to Asia, music provides a two-way channel flowing from performers to audience and back as both sides share similar aesthetic, as well as cultural and political, values. This allows for considerable musical conservatism, but also a hunger for novelty, particularly in the conditions of urbanization and modernization that marked the Yiddish popular theater more than those of more rural forms of global entertainment.

Sources of the Music

This music has been preserved in two formats: the commercial sheet music, produced mainly by publishers in the Lower East Side of New York and the manuscript folios of music directors and theaters, now housed in archives, (principally at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research). As definitive as the print versions look, they offer little performance information, being limited to simple voice and piano transcriptions (sometimes with added violin part) of what would have been played by a pit band. These music products formed a central node in a chain of marketing that started with sales of pianos on installments to immigrant families, music lessons given primarily to the girls of the household, and the extension to gramophone players for cylinders and records, which offered leisure-time, domestic reinforcement of the repertoire and ideals of live performance. Much of this material came directly from theater productions, as

indicated on the packaging of the sheet music and recordings. Small-scale marketing synergy was part of the propagation of a coherent ethnic musical subculture.

The music directors' handwritten versions varied markedly from these commercially standardized products. There were no full scores for conductors, so just individual instrumental parts and the occasional piano score survive. This gives some sense of orchestration, which varied considerably. Sets of parts, often signed out by particular theater companies, allow us to trace the flow of show folios from place to place on the Yiddish circuit. We learn that pieces might have been played in Krakow by possibly non-Jewish trumpeters of military bands, or that "this opera was performed nine times" (with dates given) in 1894 in Chicago. There is a good deal of scattered explicit and implicit data that sheds light on performance style, often in marginalia, and a considerable amount of non-Jewish music, ranging from orchestrated galops in Romania to "My Rainbow Coon" and "Ol' Man River" in New York. One 1899 assemblage includes a very mixed bag of sources: Rossini, von Suppé, Russian and Romanian folk tunes, and "Chinese" and "Neiger" melodies.

Music of the Early Period

We have almost no record of the great variety of music churned out by the street musicians and vaudevillians of Yiddish-speaking cities. The only surviving text of an extended skit ("playlet," in American vaudeville parlance) survives as the program of a show of 1895, preserved possibly because the libretto ends as an advertisement for a dry goods dealer who paid for the publication. *Tsvishn indianer* (Among the Indians), by I. Minikes, contains several song texts, but no tunes are specified. The songs are as satirical and burlesque as the plot, which finds two peddlers in what was then the western "Territories" of the midwest, trying to sell suits to a canny farmers' wife, a black fieldhand and American Indians.⁵

If this was the normal proletarian entertainment of the streets, it seems hard today to understand why the pejorative Yiddish term *shund*, or "trash," was widely applied to the "legitimate" theater productions of the early era. Two types of writers had a stake in their scorn: high-minded critics, and dramatists who wanted to follow the trends of European modernist "art" theater by decreasing the comedy and music quotients of their plays. But popular theater audiences care little for "trash talk." What interests them is the embodiment of their own values and aspirations, and also the fascination of a star system, a modern addition to earlier Jewish genres. A classic example is Boris Thomashefsky in *Alexander; or, the Crown Prince of Jerusalem* (1892),⁶ written by the indefatigable Joseph Lateiner (1853-1935, who penned some 200 shows), which set the tone for the passionate fandom and gossip that swirled around the leading singer-actors of the day in New York. Personality and lyrics even trumped musicality, as early recordings of songs from the Yiddish stage show. They were sometimes recorded by the actors who initiated the roles, and reveal their sketchy vocal training. The associated sheet music from the heyday of the

New York scene begins with modest covers that describe the contents. Line drawing, sometimes archetypally depicting imagined scenes of Biblical times or the immigrant home, gave a general sense of context, but by 1910, sheet music covers were increasingly laid out to stress the centrality of the performers or the actual action of the play, in photographic form, to emphasize the lived experience of the theater world. The frequent depictions of the songs' composers reveals how seriously they were taken as creators of beloved songs and associates of star actors and producers.

As indicated above, there are no standard performing editions of *shund* plays, so versions do not even agree on the cast of characters, let alone a fixed list of songs, not to speak of interpolations such as one instruction to include "Janke dudil (Yankee Doodle) in G." The published sheet music folios with multi-song lineup similarly did not give a sense of the total musical layout of a standard show, and many popular vehicles never produced these spinoff products. As an example of how music worked scene by scene, Lateiner's *Shloyme Gorgel* (Shloyme the Throat) which came to New York at the beginning of the immigration wave (1882), is useful, since it is documented by a published version of the text that appeared in Warsaw in 1907. Lateiner's method included adaptation of non-Jewish plays (German, Romanian) by inserting songs, dances, and comedy to match the portrayal of the characters, who were given Jewish names and concerns. The music was similarly eclectic. Plays about musicians, like this one, about a down-and-out cantor, or another Lateiner vehicle, *Dovids fidele* ("David's fiddle" of 1897) about a klezmer turned classical violinist who bests his arrogant nouveau riche brother, allowed authors to include a full range of music of many genres. They also created long-lasting stereotypes of musicians, cantors, and other social types, many of whom got to sing or dance—the matchmaker, the shlemil, the yeshiva student, the crude americanized immigrant, the tough street kid, the sweatshop worker—that carried over into Jewish-American fiction, television, and even Broadway and Hollywood.

Despite the seemingly ramshackle method of play construction, the songs in the published version of *Shloyme Gorgel* are well placed to define characters, enhance narrative, and provide sentiment, all combining to produce an effect of *yiddishkayt*, downhome Jewish folksiness. For example, Shloyme sings the first song in a courtroom for his daughter Hadassah, who has been unjustly imprisoned. It achieves three dramatic goals: 1) Gorgel, previously depicted as a rambling drunkard, is shown to have a better nature, as well as impressive cantorial talent; 2) Hadassah recognizes her long-lost father through the music, offering the general move of sentimental recognition, a major trope of the European melodrama, to be located ethnically through musicality; 3) the situation of Jews in a Polish courtroom plays up the plight and strengths of *yiddishkayt* more generally. These broader themes recur repeatedly, as in the love duet for the couple Solomon and Shifra, who sing about the hypocrisy of the world, or when Shlyome sings a solo satirizing wicked women, but ending by praising the virtuous, long-suffering working wife. This echoes the scriptural ideal wife "whose worth is above rubies," so comes from the heart of Jewish tradition, but the line "such as you won't find among the rich folks" moves the

model into a more modern, political space. These and other songs masterfully appeal to the proletarian urban audience of the Yiddish stage while at the same time supporting Jewish ideals and experiences. Meantime, knockabout comic songs, dances, and the almost obligatory closing wedding (a double one here) afford the opportunity to introduce ritual and entertainment genres from across the Yiddish world's spectrum of expressive culture, from prayers to klezmer, drunken ditties that satirize the nations and anti-Semites of Europe to appeals to God to ease the suffering of the Jews.⁷

While all stage music of the early era was eclectic, as mentioned above, some playwrights strove to "elevate" the discourse, beginning already in the 1880s with the historic music-dramas of Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908), the putative "father" of the Yiddish theater. In his seminal work *Shulamis* (ca. 1880) and the important follow-up, *Bar Kochba*, Goldfaden tried to show that even while drawing on Verdi and other non-Jewish sources, he could create dramas set in ancient times that expressed lofty sentiments and sustained the national, didactic tone of the *Haskalah* modernizing movement of which he was a part.⁸

Music of The Second Phase of Yiddish Theater

Joseph Rumshinsky (1881-1951) is credited with bringing a more professional training and tone to the Yiddish operetta. In his many works (over 100 operettas) and very popular songs, as well as his training of actors, singers, choruses, and orchestras, he set benchmarks for the developments of the 1920s and 1930s in theater and film⁹. His memoirs, a major source for understanding the evolution of Yiddish theater music, describe a moment that crystallizes his attitude towards the scene he was determined to change. He has encountered the great Ester-Rokhl Kaminska, the doyenne of Polish Yiddish drama: "Madame Kaminska...gave me some music from the opera *Shulamis*. It was on torn scraps of paper, with stains and erasures. I found it very upsetting." Nevertheless, it is not easy reconstructing Rumshinsky's own work. One opus of his more than 100 productions, *Di goldene kale* (1922) has been fully worked up in a modern critical edition by Michael Ochs and can represent this phase.¹⁰ The show, set in Russia just after the Russian Revolution, discusses such weighty topics as whether life for Jews is better in Russia or the US (with characters from both places carrying on romantic relationships), and the usual playing-out of family relations. Elements of both traditional and modern Jewish life allow for a rich variety of musical input. Ochs had a wide and varied set of sources to draw on for his work of assemblage and editing. Three commercial recordings were pressed of just one love duet, as part of a set of fourteen recordings of seven different numbers. Two sheet music folios made the music available outside of the theater, for further home performance. These commercial sources, along with a variety of lead sheets orchestral parts, typescripts of lyrics, a piano-vocal score, a radio script, and the libretto, as deposited for copyright, form parts of the puzzle that Ochs has worked with. The linguistic mix needed for these shows is also considerable, as it includes five languages, Yiddish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Hebrew, with English words assimilated into the

Americanized characters' dialogue and songs. Stitching all this together is Rumshinsky's carefully constructed musical language, doubtless enhanced by his stable of stars, who combined the versatility and flexibility with material of the older phase of theater music with a book and music that were no longer improvised on the fly, but still culturally multiple and emotionally rich enough to satisfy the increasingly sophisticated ears of a mass audience.

Those listeners were now fully tuned into mainstream American popular music, knew increasingly less Yiddish, and probably had less patience for European themes and performance styles. By the mid-1920s, it was a second or even third generation of immigrants who were taking their parents and grandparents to the theater. With the closing of mass immigration in 1924, the American audience was increasingly distanced from its roots. This was increasingly the case in Europe as well, as Sovietization shifted Yiddish culture into new channels¹¹ and assimilation in the large cities of Poland downgraded Yiddish tradition and elevated more cosmopolitan forms of cabaret, film, and pop song. Polish Jews also played a large role in the newer forms of mass marketed media for mainstream audiences, as did the American Jewish songwriters of the era of American standards, or their French and German counterparts in western Europe. Even in the USSR under state socialism, the most important creators of the hugely popular mass songs, largely disseminated through films, were Jews who came from a generation that shifted its creative work from Yiddish to dominant linguistic, political, and musical trends.

The Culminating Phase of the 1930s

With no new influx of immigrants, the shutting down of ethnic recordings by the music industry due to the Depression, and the looming danger to the Jews of eastern Europe, one might imagine that Yiddish theater music and its rising partner, Yiddish film, would collapse. Yet the 1930s saw the culminating phase of the projects set in motion from the 1880s-1920s. Goldfaden plays did not disappear from stages. New Yiddish "art theater" productions found more modernist music to supplant the *shund*-era patchwork and circumvent the Rumshinsky-founded mainstream. A generation of immensely talented songwriters such as Alexander Olshanetsky (1892-1946), Abraham Ellstein (1907-63), and Sholom Secunda (1894-1974) sprang up, who often saw their songs premiered in shows, ranging from revues to dramas. Secunda wrote the song that became the greatest crossover hit from Yiddish to mainstream American popularity, "Bay mir bist du sheyn." People in Poland sang songs written in New York, the flow mainly going from the US to Europe. For this period, film music is the most interesting area to watch. Jewish-American independent film began around 1918, paralleling only the African-American effort in pioneering the idea of ethnic subcultural cinema. With the advent of the "talkies," Yiddish could take its place in both the aural and the visual imaginary of Jews worldwide, and music played its role in selling the concept. Alongside filmed versions of well-known stage plays, with their attendant melodrama and downhome music cues, the Yiddish musical emerged as an extension of the

Rumshinsky enterprise. Younger songwriters jumped at the opportunity to create filmscores. Meanwhile, in Poland, despite severe economic and political turmoil, the local Jewish talent pool found ways to produce a set of homegrown movies in Yiddish as well. Comparing the two sides of this transatlantic system and their overlap is instructive.

On the Polish side, the surviving film (many are lost) that has become most emblematic of Yiddish cinema is *The Dybbuk* (1937), an adaptation of the canonical play by S. An-sky first seen in the early 1920s and widely translated and paraphrased in many media in various countries ever since. The movie's director, Michael Waszynski, had pioneered talkies in Poland and claimed to have studied with both Stanislavsky in theater and Murnau in film. On the set for "The Dybbuk," he could rely on the skills of leading designers and technicians, some of whom were refugees from Nazi Germany, hence had worked in Weimar cinema. So as deeply as "The Dybbuk" delves into the fast-fading provincial Jewish life and as much as it relies on vernacular language, religious custom, music, and body movements, it is the work of a remarkably cosmopolitan crew and outlook that ranges from Stanislavsky acting and Polish literature through German expressionist cinema. Upon its release, the film was widely seen and reviewed not just by Jews, but also a general Polish audience and critics. When the movie reached America, *The New York Times* felt it needed to write a review, and found the movie "incredible in its way as a documentary film of life among the pygmies or a trip to the Middle Ages."

More than in the original play, music draws the audience into Polish-Jewish life, beginning with the newly-added prologue featuring the great cantor Gershon Sirota, who is heard, but not seen on camera, due to his religious scruples. The dreamy main theme, a setting of "The Song of Songs," recurs as a leitmotif of the doomed romance of the couple, and there is conventional score as well. A klezmer band accompanies the Hasidic *rebbe* at his Sabbath gathering. Beyond even these already highly evocative music cues, a host of other gestures to small-town folklore give *The Dybbuk* a deeply local atmosphere that Jewish-American cinema tends only to gesture at. Nevertheless, it is the choreographed beggars' dances of Judith Berg that stick in most viewers' minds, and they come out of Warsaw art, not shtetl custom. The folklorization by composers, choreographers, set designers, and art directors is part of a "national" project that on the one hand goes back to the great Polish-Jewish writer Y. L. Peretz, but on the other, has a certain kinship to Goldfaden's ideals, much as Peretz disliked the early Yiddish theater's approach.

A Polish-Jewish film that takes a less sentimental, but still outsider, approach to the small-town past is *Freylikhe kaptsonim* ("The Jolly Paupers"), from the same time-frame as *The Dybbuk*. As played by the great comedians Dzigal and Schumacher, the looniness of a couple of shtetl Jews who think they have discovered oil is portrayed satirically, almost menacingly. The music ranges from a young couple's romantic Yiddish theater song to the garbled cantorial wailing of the two hapless heroes (taken from a madman they meet in an asylum) pitting generations against each other in a commentary on modernity

that in some ways parallels the subtext of *The Dybbuk*, with its focus on the breakdown of the old religious ways and the ascendance of youthful eroticism, even if expressed in much deeper, demonic ways than the satire of *The Jolly Paupers*.

The Yiddish films shot in the US stand apart from these European concerns. By the late 1920s, American Jewish popular culture had shifted into a more nostalgic view of the “Old Country” than is apparent in the early immigration-era entertainment. Recreating scenes from European life on flimsy sets in New Jersey, filmmakers used older musical styles, from folksongs to the then-popular cantorial bravado, as a foil to scenes of Americanization. It was easy for them to rely on older melodramatic plots and conventions, particularly about family life. Scores could cue tearjerking moments of reunion or rejection in conventional fashion. But the movies also offered the possibility of lively musical comedies with up-to-date, if ethnically-tinged, romantic or humorous songs by Rumshinsky or his main successors, Abraham Ellstein and Alexander Olshanetsky.

The film that is usually cited as the culmination of all these trends is *Yidl mitn fidl* (directed by Joseph Green, 1936), starring a group of American actors fortified by a large Polish-Jewish cast and technical team. It was shot on location in the town of Kazimierz nad dolny, with its classic central marketplace and surrounding Jewish neighborhood, before moving out both to the Polish countryside and big cities in a panoramic presentation of European Jewry on the very eve of its destruction. It is a film that is impossible not to view ironically today, as a poignant time-capsule that is at the same time very American in its music and sensibilities. Ellstein’s score makes accurate nods to local non-Jewish folklore in the opening sequence as well as to traditional Jewish melodies, grounding the utopian aspirations of the movie musical in the lived reality of small-town Poland. At film’s end, the klezmer characters will board a boat towards American stardom, paralleling Hollywood’s happy-ending solution to the preceding tangles of emotion and, in this case, the burdens of ethnicity. It is a format that could, and did, appeal to both sides of the transatlantic Jewish movie-going public.

Music could both support and challenge nostalgia, suppress or champion modernity in Yiddish cinema. *The Cantor’s Son* (1940), starring the glamorous Moishe Oysher who uncomfortably juggled popular song and cantorial careers, takes homesickness to the extreme by showing its immigrant singer returning to his hometown in Europe to reunite with his childhood sweetheart, despite success and a woman in New York’s Jewish nightclub and radio scene. Throughout, the hero refuses to sing pop songs, sticking with cantorial and old-fashioned musical fare. In conservative films of the period, issues of assimilation and intermarriage are worked out musically. As the viewership for Yiddish-language cinema was aging, filmmakers were more likely to stay with earlier styles and issues than to Americanize the music enough to try to compete with Hollywood and attract a younger audience. Ambivalence could also creep into the use of older musical layers, as in the film *Uncle Moses*, a withering indictment of sweatshop-boss control of the garment industry and union

pushback and the first Yiddish sound film to take on hot-button up-to-date issues—but not current Jewish-American music. The main theme, tied to the protagonist, a boss who lords it over his immigrant compatriots, is the prayer *Ovinu malkenu*, learned from his old-world rabbi. While this might create an equation of religion=oppression of the working class, the sentimentality of the tune carries through to the very end, almost mitigating the dark side of Uncle Moses. Along with the klezmer and badkhn at the boss's wedding, the completely old-fashioned insider make-up of the plot calls to mind J. Hoberman's helpful summary of the situation: "If individual films often precipitated a conflict between tradition and modernity, the Yiddish cinema in toto can be seen as something of an extended family quarrel."¹² But the younger generation has no counterpart musical themes of any importance.

In this period, music plays its part in softening the edges of in-group hostility more than it supports strife. A fine example comes in a 1924 disc called *A yidisher heym in Amerike* (A Jewish Home in America)—one of those recorded theatrical scenes that extend the range of the topic beyond stage and cinema. The daughter of the house enters with her boyfriends, who play a lively version of a pop song, "Yes sir, that's my baby" on piano and ukulele. The father demands that they stop and sing a cantorial number with him, no less than the august "Hayom haras oylem" from the Rosh Hashanah service. They dutifully chime in with voice and instruments—somehow they know how to function as a synagogue choir--and domestic piece is restored.

Decline and Revitalization

Just as African-American "race film" withered in the 1940s when black musicians were integrated into Hollywood vehicles, most Jewish-American talent had long since migrated into the mainstream musical niches open on stage and film, achieving remarkable upward mobility at a time when Jews were socially restricted in many other avenues of public life. Still, this increasing comfort with American life also allowed for the theatricality of stage and screen to filter into the burgeoning Jewish entertainment of the "Borscht Belt," a catchphrase for a variety of weekend and summer vacation venues that gave work to musicians, actors, and comedians. The last Yiddish film of the older era, *Catskill Honeymoon* of 1950, offers a glimpse of the eclectic and sometimes unexpected acts presented to dinner-table audiences. As Hoberman puts it, the film "dissolved Yiddish movies into canned vaudeville."¹³ Nevertheless, the movie played long in Jewish neighborhoods. Framed as a golden anniversary party, the movie thus directly states its appeal to an aging audience. There is a biting Yiddish parody of "The Anniversary Waltz," an Al Jolson hit song of the period set to an old Euro-Argentine waltz. *Catskill Honeymoon's* sixteen night-club numbers, simply staged as acts at Reeds Gap Hotel, include some archaic Yiddish comedy numbers based on stuttering or local dialect (Litvak vs. Galitsianer, an American theme decades old), some tame American torch and sentimental songs, a bit of opera, but little Yiddish music outside a couple of Ellstein-style items from an earlier era. It closes with a tribute to Israel, in Yiddish

and English, graphically illustrating the shift of sentiment towards the new Zionist-based song and dance numbers that would further eclipse Yiddish as an expressive language.

Carryovers continued in the work of the 1940s-1950s recording and night-spot entertainers such as Mickey Katz, the Barton Brothers, and Irving Fields, who riffed parodically and often satirically on the ambivalence of postwar Jewish-American life. Their records resounded in homes despite some communal disapproval. It is important to think of these artists as inheritors of a long lineage of in-group musical commentary on immigration, post-immigration, discomfort with American reality, and generational friction. Early Yiddish-language broadside songs, sold on the streets as early as the 1880s, gave way to comedy recordings in the form of skits with songs that carried on vaudeville traditions that have largely been lost and provide a link with the post-world war two styles and, more recently, recent revivals of those sensibilities.

By the 1970s, young Jewish-American musicians from a variety of backgrounds and training converged on the remnants of Yiddish music. Although the early klezmer revival, as it came to be called, relied heavily on the sound recordings of the 1914-32 era and thought of the repertoire as European music performed mostly in the US, as time went on, the theater and cinema sources began to emerge as source, particularly in the work of Hankus Netsky, whose Klezmer Conservatory Band was influential. The band's vocalist, Judy Bresler, from a Yiddish theater family, consistently sang older material from stage and sheet music sources, as did other singers across the US who eventually exported the material to their European students. At workshops and institutes worldwide, on websites and recordings, the rich tradition of Yiddish theater and cinema music continues to make a meaningful contribution to contemporary music.

¹ Cf. <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Purim-shpil> for a short introduction to the genre.

² For a good performance and this description of the theatrical quality—"I remember her with her white shawl on her head, covered, and she drew close to her my sister and me and standing, still in darkness"—see Bella Bryks-Klein's contribution to *The Yiddish Song of the Week*, <http://yiddishsong.wordpress.com/2010/05/25/got-fun-avrom-performed-by-bella-bryks-klein/>

³ For a classic recorded version, listen to "Am koydesh" from Ruth Rubin's album *Yiddish Folksong: The Old Country*, available on cd from Smithsonian Folkways Records or attached to *Yiddish Folksongs from the Ruth Rubin Archive*, ed. C. Mlotek and M. Slobin, Wayne State University Press, 2007.

- ⁴ Joel Schechter, "Back to the Popular Source," in J. Schechter, ed., *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook*. London and NY: Routledge, 2003, pp. 3 and 4.
- ⁵ For an English translation and commentary, see Mark Slobin, "From Vilna to vaudeville: Minikes and *Among the Indians* (1895), in J. Schechter, *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook*. London and NY: Routledge, 2003, pp. 202-211.
- ⁶ Ronald Robboy has written about the play and its music in "Reconstructing a Yiddish Theatre Score," in J. Berkowitz and B. Henry, eds. *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012, pp. 225-250.
- ⁷ For excerpts of *Shloyme gorgel* and a full translation of *Dovids fidele*, both with suggested music, see Mark Slobin, *Yiddish Theater in America*, Volume 11 of *Nineteenth-Century American Musical Theater*. New York and London: Garland, 1994.
- ⁸ A full performing edition of *Shulamis* has been arranged and produced by Alyssa Quint and Zalmen Mlotek, with translation by Nahma Sandrow, in 2010, so the play continues to have its remarkable hold on the Jewish-American imagination.
- ⁹ For a modern compilation, see *Joseph Rumshinsky: Great Songs of the Yiddish Stage*, volume 3. Milken Music Archive CD, 2006.
- ¹⁰ The Ochs edition will form one of the forty volumes of the *Music of the United States of America* series, Richard Crawford editor-in-chief, to be published by A-R Editions.
- ¹¹ for a fine account of this process, see Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Bloomington and Indianapolis; Indiana University Press, 2006.
- ¹² J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds*. New York: The Museum of Modern art and Schocken Books, 1991, p. 9, 2d. ed. 2010, Hanover NH: Dartmouth College Press.
- ¹³ Hoberman, *ibid.*, p. 337.