Choosing Voices: The American Cantorate Project, 1983-6

Mark Slobin

From 1983-86, I served as Project Director for the History of the American Cantorate, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The resulting deep database can be found at http://cantorate.wesleyan.edu. My 1989 book *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (University of Illinois Press) interprets those findings. The present article narrates the origins, planning, and execution of that groundbreaking attempt to document the existence of "cantors" in the United States over a 300-year period. The first known cantor is mentioned in 1696, and the term shifted scope and meaning dramatically over the next 300 years, so there was a great deal of ground to cover.

I took on the project at the urging of Samuel Rosenbaum, for many years the energetic leader of the Cantors Assembly, the professional organization of Conservative-denomination cantors, numbering about 450 at the time. I had written the grant proposal at Rosenbaum's suggestion, and was stunned when we actually received a very large grant. Sam said "so you'll run it," and promised me complete latitude in what I would gather and how I would interpret it. I took on the task, but not without misgivings, since I had never studied, nor planned to study, the American cantorate, and there was zero research to build on. I took it as an invigorating assignment to design the goals and methodology for such a study and to figure out how to execute a plan that had to be largely intuitive in its first phase. It was so rare for an American ethnomusicologist to work with more than just a handful of collaborators, and have enough funding to put on research assistants and take time off from university teaching, that I relished the challenge. I understood that I would be working at the intersection of two axes: the very long timeline of Jewish tradition and the much shorter one of American history. The United States (and Canada, included in the study) offered ample room for cultural improvisation, sanctioning diversity of religious practice in a way quite different from European societies. I limited my scope to the Ashkenazic service for the sake of economy though I did interview Hazzan Abraham Lopez Cardozo of the foundational New York congregation Shearith Israel and commissioned a survey of the Sephardic cantors of Los Angeles's (by Carol Merrill-Mirsky).

My main concern at the outset was to define the object of study in a way that would allow for data development and ease of compilation, looking forward to a book as the project's outcome. I decided that any such study of a profession would have to consist of four domains: the historical, based on primary and secondary sources, the sociological, looking at the institutional structure in which the cantor is embedded, the ethnographic, built on oral histories, and the musicological, trying to see how "the music" of sacred song played into the narrative of the profession. Below, I detail the approach to each domain and their interaction.

History

This was the most straightforward domain, and as the results of my survey are in *Chosen Voices*, there's no need to rehearse them here. I was struck by how unstable any version of *hazzan* or "cantor" remained over three centuries, morphing from one

temporary shape to another. It might include considerable communal responsibility or none, be totally focused on expressive musicianship or lack any. Not only did incoming waves of Jewish immigrants from different world areas make things mobile, but the seismic historic shifts that marked the history of world Jewry and the succession of Americanizing generations meant there would not be a settled state for the Cantorate. Even the constant of gender role-always male-shifted after 1976 when the Reform movement ordained its first female cantor. In any case, the very role of the cantor in Jewish tradition, as a religiously non-mandated figure serving at the whim of a lay congregation, argued against entrenched stability. For insight, I turned to American sociologists of professions, but was not comforted. They were surprised at my description of the career of the cantor, unmatched in any other sphere of American professional life, and wished me well. The only tidbit they offered--that the profession might well decline in value as women entered it—has not turned out to be the case.

About the other three domains of the research, methodology played a key role in the results, so I will go into more detail about the design of the work.

Sociology

I was lucky to have approved access to the members of the Cantors Assembly (CA), and they were generous in their responses. A questionnaire was in order, but it was hard to know what to ask, even about the work cantors do in the synagogue. I started by giving a list of possible activities and asked them how many hours they spent on each one. I was surprised at the great variety of the results about time and energy investment. I asked if they had problems with their clergy colleague, the rabbi. I had heard that the number of regular "daveners," congregants who chant alongside the cantor, was dwindling, so asked about that. For music, I queried their sources and tried to ascertain which liturgical texts they thought were the most challenging, including which they would ask for if they were testing a cantor's qualification, which I thought would get to the heart of their thinking. The two questions evoked different answers. I prodded them on the admission of women to the profession and left an open question about the future of the Cantorate, which garnered some interesting responses.

We also sent questionnaires to each synagogue served by a CA cantor. This is methodologically awkward, since I don't know who filled out and returned the forms – it might have been the cantor himself. The questions were addressed to lay leadership issues and meant to complement the cantorial responses. Finally, due to the helpful work of Abraham Karp, a rabbi and a scholar, we were able to ask a set of rabbis about their relationship to cantors, who responded with often revealing free-form letters. The oral history tapes, detailed below, offered another occasion for asking about the cantorial workplace.

Ethnography

The project arrived at a fortuitous moment. We were able to interview several generations of cantors, representing strata of the profession, some 125 in all. It would not have been possible to get such comprehensive coverage even a few years later. There were the European-born sacred singers, such as the eminent David

Koussevitsky, the Americans trained by family members or European immigrants in the 1920s-1940s, and the first generation of seminary graduates from the formal programs begun in the mid-1950s. In addition, some women were already in the field, including Reform cantors and members of an informal organization called the Women Cantors Network, so we could cross the gender line as well.

The unit of research was the 90-minute cassette tape, then the standard format for interviews. I designed a set of themes that both I and my research associates could follow, to somewhat standardize the results. Beginning with "how did you get to be a cantor," which had to be guided to an ending or it would have taken up the whole tape, the interviews continued through synagogue work and musical choices. I wanted to interject a surprise question that would make the cantors slow down and think. The cantor is the *sheliach tzibur*, the "messenger of the congregation," but I was not sure what the message was and how it was circulating, especially as God was never mentioned in the interviews. I came up with this challenge: "when you lead the service, are you praying for yourself as well as the congregation?" The interviewees would stop short, perplexed. I could see that not only were they trying to figure out how they felt, but also how their answer would appear, as a public statement. There were some remarkably frank responses. I once played excerpts for a group of cantors and they were sometimes shocked by what their colleagues had to say about the private and public meanings of prayer.

In terms of pure fieldwork, perhaps the most delicate moment came with Samuel/Shmuel Vigoda. Already over 90, Vigoda had published an extensive and historic collection of anecdotes about cantors of the past. When I approached him at the legendary Catskills mountain resort Grossinger's, he challenged us: "why should I talk to you when I already wrote the book?" I was put on my mettle, with my research assistants standing by. I rejoined with "the book is great, but who is *not* in it? Shmuel Vigoda." "All right, let's talk," he said, and we reaped a rich interview.

<u>Musicology</u>

In considering how cantors act as sacred singers within American congregations, I became aware that there were three issues involved in the mid-1980s around the musical content of weekly services: the balance between composed settings, cantorial solos, and congregational participatory songs. Older Conservative cantors clung to at least one of the first and second categories, but were feeling increasing pressure from their congregants to allow for more of their own voice. Reform cantors did not improvise, largely singing their settings off the shelf from collections of prayer arrangements, and were yielding ground to lay people's hunger for participation. There were clear watershed moments, such as the arrival guitar-playing female cantor in her twenties who was replacing an older figure, in a large German-heritage congregation used to standard settings with choir and organ. So in *Chosen Voices*, I created the category of "music of presentation" for the composed settings, "music of participation" for the rising number of sing-along moments, and "music of improvisation" for the older style of cantorial solo performance. For the latter, I took on the term *nusach* tentatively, mainly quoting cantors on their use of that slippery yet highly significant term.

In the interviews with experienced Conservative cantors, I thought it might be possible to explore their ideas of appropriateness and improvisation in sacred song. Some had been trained to elaborate on the standard approach to liturgical texts, and they approached the topic thoughtfully. It would be good for a future researcher to collect and analyze their comments, as I did not follow up in depth. The central methodology that suited my musicological approach relied on a core sample of selected text settings that could show variety or unity of practice. For the "presentation" section, I chose one highly significant passage: the *Barchu* that serves as entry to the service, presenting it in versions by composers from the seventeenth to the late twentieth centuries. To understand cantors' personal repertoire, I needed to construct a core sample of many professionals singing the same items, to suggest the range of possibilities. Since no one had ever compiled such a database, I had to intuit what I was looking for: a set of pieces for which some text settings would be nearly uniform across cantors, some which had favorite dominant melodies with some variety, and a couple of examples of texts for which there were many individual versions. I had no idea what to choose, so I consulted the Board of the CA. They shrugged their shoulders, saying that they had no idea how other cantors sang, but eventually we produced a consensus of possibilities.

The final sample, available now online, is stunning. I gathered it by asking the CA cantors to tape a cassette in their office, since it was not possible to tape actual services, due to Sabbath restrictions. I expected 20-30 of them to mail me their tapes, but to my delight, 93 did, creating an unparalleled cross-section of sacred song. As I had hoped, there were items with great standardization (cantillation tunes), ones with strong favorites ("Lecha dodi,"), ones with favorites and variants ("Yimloch," "Tzur Yisroel," "Neqadesh") and two with a broad spectrum of choices: "Uvchen ten pachdecha" and, most variegated, the opening of the "Ashrei" for Selichot). The 93 cantors sang the latter text in a style that ranged from the most straightforward chant to extremely melismatic, impassioned performance, all on a text consisting of just six words. Again, it would be very helpful for future researchers to dig into this sample and come up with more penetrating analyses than I produced for the small scope of *Chosen Voices.* Another option was to commission scholars to do separate reports for the project, including my research collaborators on the project. Lionel Wolberger did a comprehensive study of the Sabbath service of some two dozen Conservative congregations, based entirely on notes and memory rather than recordings, and compiled statistics. Jeffrey Summit wrote his M. A. thesis on part-time cantors in greater Boston, expanding the range of the topic. Louis Weingarden, a composer who had also studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary, completed extensive interviews with the important figure Max Wohlberg and helped select the compositions for the *Barchu* sample. Judit Frigyesi wrote a fine music analytical essay based on the "Neqadesh" variants. Much of this material is now online.

It was an honor and a privilege to work with such a large group of dedicated professional cantors at a very timely moment in history. I hope that the cantorate will thrive in increasingly difficult times for organized Jewish life. It has been instructive to see the uptick in interest among the Orthodox in traditional *hazzanut*; at the time of the project, both modern and ultra-orthodox congregations were turning their back on the

profession. Just as the role of the cantor has been in flux since it emerged from the mists of history a thousand years ago, it will continue to evolve, particularly in the volatile atmosphere of American society.