



When was this written?

Studying the Yiddish Folksong by Mark Slobin

For Eastern European Jewish music, there is more written on sacred song than on secular styles. The purpose of the present article is to provide a short account of the Yiddish-language folksong as a research area, including a thumbnail sketch of its musical characteristics.

Like other Jewish repertoires, the Yiddish folksong is highly eclectic, representing centuries of adaptation to an immense variety of geographic, linguistic, historical, and musical situations. At its height, Yiddish was spoken from the North Sea to the Black Sea by millions of people involved in radically different lifestyles. Broadly speaking, for the Eastern European end of this huge region we can distinguish three stylistic strata for the early twentieth century, the period when serious collecting of Yiddish folksong began: 1) songs anonymously composed, related to the mainstream European unaccompanied song tradition. This includes major genres

such as the ballad, the love song, the lullaby, the recruit song, etc.; 2) songs of literary origin traceable (in either text, melody, or both) to Haskalah ("enlightenment") writers. Many of these became folklorized, often with astonishing speed. Here we would also include songs from the Yiddish theater, the founders of which (particularly Abraham Goldfaden in the 1870's and 1880's) deliberately borrowed from folk sources or wrote in a folk vein (Yiddish *folkstimlikh*) to insure popularity. This method worked; many theater songs became folksongs in short order; 3) songs of social movements, particularly leftist and Zionist movements, which proliferated from the 1880's on. The leftist songs often parallel non-Jewish styles of similar movements. One finds a switch from the traditional solo accompaniment style to group performance, as befits the new social context of the songs.

It is not my purpose to survey such an

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2,000 songs
collected in
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extensive sweep of song traditions, though the material does cry out for a full-length study; to date, we have only scattered works on the subject, almost none of which take up the musical aspects of the repertoire (see the bibliographic note at the end of the present article). I shall address myself only to the first category and within it, just to a single, dominant song-type which lies at the heart of the older Yiddish-language repertoire. I have in mind the unaccompanied song of love and/or separation, perhaps the major category of this layer of folksong. The genre is well represented in the standard anthologies of Yiddish song done in pre-Holocaust years, and crops up incessantly in fieldwork with older informants. It is a genre with clear ties to the general European folksong tradition, with some of the Yiddish examples perhaps datable to Renaissance times in terms of the themes, plots, or characters of the song texts. All across Europe, overstepping linguistic, geographic, and historical boundaries, one finds unaccom-

panied songs dealing with various aspects of the relation between the sexes, all similarly structured in quatrain (four-line) stanzas, where the musical setting is strophic, i.e. the same basic melody is recycled for each new quatrain of text. This genre falls into two large categories; narrative and lyric. The former actively sets out to tell a story; scholars tend to lump these songs under the heading of "ballad." The latter describes a more static situation, often unhappy, in which the protagonists are fixed at the moment.

The song I have chosen as our paradigm of the tradition is from the latter category. The performance to be examined is by Lifsha Schaechter Widman, one of the key contributors to the YIVO Jewish Folksong Project, a major fieldwork study done by Dr. Barbara-Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, eminent folklorist, under the auspices of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities) in the early 1970's. The project resulted in some two thousand

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Ex. 1. "Az in droyen gezt a regn." Singer: Lifsha Schaechter Widman.

dro-eyn

As in droy- en gezt a reg- en / Ve- ren di ahteyn- de- lakh nas/

D'ost mir dokh tsi-ge-sugt di vest mit mir kha- se- ne hu- bn /

As ikh vel mikh op- ahteln di er- ahte klas.

Di host mir dokh tsi-ge-sugt di vest mit mir kha- se- ne hu- bn/

As ikh vel mikh op- ahteln di er- ahte klas.

songs and extensive life histories from about a dozen carefully selected singers chosen for their amateur status and for the importance music played in their lives. The song is highly typical of its category. Following the practice of both singers and scholars, we shall use its first words as title: "Az in droysn geyt a regn" ("it's raining outside"). In the first stanza of Widman's 1974 performance note the quite common practice of repeating the second half of the song.

The story of "Az in droysn geyt a regn" is simple and almost standard, a fact which takes nothing away from the pathos of the situation. As is often the case, we have a dialogue between sweethearts, who both fret about how they can get married, since they have no money. He swears he'll beg and borrow, just to be her husband, but the matter remains unresolved at song's end. Typically, then, no easy solution is offered in the lyric song.

The text of the first stanza is quite specific and familiar in its structure. The quatrain is divided into two two-line units which are seemingly unrelated thematically. "It's raining outdoors/the stones get wet" is only indirectly linked to "You promised to marry me/When I finish the first class." A mood-setting opening is frequently found not just in Yiddish, but also in other European lyric song repertoires. Often, as is the case here, an image of nature appears as backdrop to the singer's sentiment. As is so common in the Yiddish-language song, the image is urban: it is the dripping of the rain on the stones (probably cobblestones or gravel) which is offered, rather than the more likely mountain or forest image that would crop up in, say, a Russian folksong. Also noteworthy is the fact that the opening couplet is not specific to the song at hand; in Widman's repertoire, there is

another song with different subsequent text and radically different musical style which begins with the same two-line, mood-setting introduction. Such use of stock components, of course, is part and parcel of the folksong tradition of most music cultures.

Let us turn our attention to the melody. The song is in the minor mode—or is it? The *e-flat* that allows the "minor" designation appears only in line D. In lines A and B, we find *e-natural*. This disparity brings us to a consideration of the overall melodic shape of the song. That the *e-natural* occurs in both lines B and C makes us notice the overall arched contour of the melody: A starts low, rises just a fifth (*g'-d'*) and sinks back to the main tonal orientation point of the song, *g'*. Lines B and C start high, at the top note of line A (*d'*) and outline an upper range of a fifth (*d'-a'*, though note that the *a'* occurs only in the repeat of line C, not the first time through), just as line A sketched out a lower fifth. Line C moves towards a falling contour, ending on *b-flat*, leaving to line D the final sinking down to *g'*. Thus, we have a successive set of one-line melodic units that work within the micro-world of pentachords, rather than an octave-species approach to tonal construction. No wonder it is hard to assign a flat (no pun intended) "minor" label to the song as a whole.

It is in the process of returning to the opening tonal level that the *e-flat* is introduced, in the form of a cadential gesture that suggests, almost retrospectively, a minor sense for the tune. This tonal subtlety is a characteristic and striking aspect of the Yiddish folksong, and has yet to be properly studied. Generally, we can say that folksingers think of tonality as one of the shaping forces of a song, as one of the expressive parameters available in song

construction. The introduction of a new tonal gesture at a cadential point is one such affective strategy. Another is the appearance, at key points, of "ornamental" figures. I use quotes for the word "ornamental" to indicate my lack of faith in that familiar term. When folksingers deliberately and consistently introduce specific gestures, why should we term them "ornaments," a word which indicates something auxiliary, non-essential, when this occurrence is part of the basic architecture of the song?

In the case at hand, we have the usual two underscorings, as one might prefer to call them, of the melodic line. One is the two-note figure such as occurs on the syllables "gey" and "rey" in line A. This consists of the pitch being stressed, its upper neighbor, and then the main pitch, and recurs in the next line on the syllable "de." All three uses of this expressive gesture occur on a falling interval of a second, as they do 100% of the time in two versions of "Az in droysn geyt a regn" sung by Widman with a twenty-year gap between performances. Here we have a fine example of the consistency of so-called ornaments alluded to earlier. The natural question is: Why does this figure occur? In line A, the underscoring seems to accent the appropriate syllable (in terms of spoken speech stress) for the phrase "geyt a reygn." Yet this phrase itself has already been reshaped melodically in such a way as to alter its speech stress. Widman sings "gey-et a rey-gn," and "rey-gn" itself is drawn out to almost sound like "rey-ey-gn." Our suspicion that speech stress is not the issue here is supported by the line B appearance of our little figure, which falls on the non-stressed syllable "de" of "shteyn-de-lakh."

This brief excursion into the analysis of "ornament" points up only one of many

unsolved issues of Yiddish folksong analysis, and brings in the question of speech stress as well. In her repetition of lines C and D, Widman radically alters the rhythmic setting of the phrase "di vest mit mir khasene hubn." Why? A possible answer is that variety itself is part and parcel of the aesthetic of the folksinger. But is this approach typical of Widman, or of the tradition? More properly phrased, is this an idiolect, does it represent a dialect (regional?) of Yiddish folksong or is it in fact typical of the whole folksong "language?" Unfortunately, such questions are ultimately unanswerable due to the twin facts of the lack of thorough research of the tradition before 1939 and the subsequent destruction of the culture in its homeland after 1939. We simply do not have the kind of data that researchers of other Eastern European traditions (e.g. Hungarian, Rumanian) have salted away in their voluminous institutes and archives and have available in the living tradition of hundreds of villages and towns. We in the Jewish world are forced to work with fragments, with the merest crumbs of the rich banquet that was once the Yiddish folksong tradition.

I said that there were two basic "ornaments" in our song. The second is the glide between two neighboring pitches that is deliberately placed at certain points and which is characteristic of the tradition as a whole. In "Az in droysn geyt a reygn" the glide occurs once in its most unusual place, the drooping cadential syllable "nas" of line B, where it spans a minor third. However, the glide can also move up, as it does at the opening of the same line on "ve-ren." Again we are faced with a difficult task of analysis. While these swooping figures occur throughout the tradition, they are unevenly distributed among singers. We

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are reminded here of the collector and ethnomusicologist Moshe Beregovski's astute delineation of three types of Yiddish folksingers, observed during his extensive fieldwork experience in the Ukraine of the 1930s.¹ The first type tends to sing in a moderate tempo at mezzo forte and to keep this steady throughout, keeping underscorings to a minimum. The second prefers considerable rubato, quasi-dramatization of the text through musical gestures, and more frequent underscoring. The third is marked off socially as well as musically, tending to come from the intelligentsia, and collects songs from others, rendering them in an unvarying manner (as opposed to the more improvising first two types). Following this typology, Widman probably belongs to type 2, since she enjoys rubato, dramatization of lines, and fairly frequent use of underscoring gestures. Even here, however, there is a catch: Widman was more of a type 2 folksinger in 1974, when she was in her seventies, than when taped

twenty years earlier, suggesting that age can also be a factor.

The personal aesthetic and social stratification cited by Beregovski were possible to observe when the culture was still alive, *in situ*. In our times we can only work with individuals, not communities. There are a great many questions one would like to have asked Widman about her performance, but she passed away shortly after her last taping sessions.

I have touched upon only a few parameters of one stanza of one song in the performance of one singer. I hope merely to have demonstrated how challenging and complex the Yiddish folksong is as a research area, and how important to our overall understanding of Jewish, particularly Eastern European Jewish, tradition, a thorough study of this material could be.

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FOOTNOTE

¹From an unpublished work of Beregovski's, volume two of his *Jewish Folksongs* (1938), in the single known copy, kept at the YIVO Archives, New York.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

There is next to nothing written in English on the musical side of the Yiddish folksong, though there are a number of worthy items on their texts (for a listing, see the Appendix to the Beregovski volume cited below). The best introductory source is my edition of Moshe Beregovski's selected works, published as *Old Jewish Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1982). See also Chapters 1 and 8 of

my *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: Univ. of Ill. Press, 1982), which deal with musical context and musical style. Cantor Max Wohlberg has written a thought-provoking article on the connections between sacred and secular song in the Eastern European milieu ("The Music of the Synagogue as a Source of the Yiddish Folksong," *Musica Judaica* 2/1, 1977-8, pp. 21-50). While he raises legitimate points, I would offer the complementary view that the folksong and the sacred song are both units within a larger field, Eastern European Jewish music; hence, influences can go both ways, and both may borrow freely from surrounding music cultures as part of the broad eclecticism which characterizes traditional Jewish music.

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