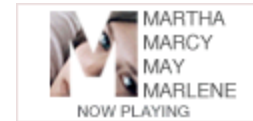


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POP/JAZZ

POP/JAZZ; In Yiddish Music, A Return to Roots Of Torment and Joy

By BARRY SINGER

FOR more than a century, Yiddish music has survived in America. The melodic vernacular of displaced Jews from Eastern Europe, it is a music of secular wit and religious fervor, the music of a people in a conflicted dance with assimilation.

From the 1880's into the 1900's -- the earliest decades of immigration -- Yiddish music remained indistinguishable from Jewish ancestry, its riotous ceremonial stomps (freylakhs), the comic patter tunes (kuplets) and the warm, homey (heymish) ballads, all written and performed as they had been in Europe -- for Jewish audiences in Jewish ghettos. In a breathtakingly brief time, though, Jews in America began to assimilate and Yiddish music mutated. Blended with ragtime, interlaced with the blues, melted down, by the 1930's and 40's, in a Tin Pan Alley cauldron of American popular music, it finally seemed to disappear. But it was never entirely gone.

Now there are stirrings of a Yiddish music renaissance. Klezmer, the Yiddish bluegrass music, leads this revival, taken up by a new, young generation; bands with names like the Klezmatics and Klezmer Madness record prodigiously and tour widely. Even the classical violinist Itzhak Perlman, in the company of klezmer's brightest young performers, was moved to revisit this seemingly lost world on his 1996 album "In the Fiddler's House."

Among avant-garde and experimental musicians, like John Zorn and Steve Reich, Yiddish music has become a means for exploring their Jewish roots via unlikely, cutting-edge reinterpretations. The Knitting Factory, New York's leading venue for alternative music, pursues its own Jewish music agenda with an annual Passover Seder at Avery Fisher Hall, "Radical Jewish Culture" tours of Europe and Israel and a festival in part devoted to self-consciously contemporary performances of Yiddish music, under the rubric "Who Is the Jew?"

It is the actor and singer Mandy Patinkin, however, who is engaged in perhaps the most personal and revealing program of Yiddish music restoration. On his new CD "Mamaloshen"

("Mother Tongue") Mr. Patinkin tackles an extraordinary range of Diaspora melodies, from warhorses like "Yome, Yome" and "Papirosin" to Paul Simon's "An American Tune" -- all sung, for the most part, in Yiddish. The album has sold more than 75,000 copies. Currently Mr. Patinkin is performing music culled from "Mamaloshen" in a riveting evening at the Orensanz Center for the Arts, a former synagogue on the Lower East Side. His kaleidoscopic medleys trace the history of Yiddish music's intermingled influences from Europe to America. (The show's five-week run concludes on Saturday.)

Certainly, the Yiddish music revival mirrors a millennial fascination with ethnic music. From Kazak choirs to Cuban conjuntos and Irish clog dancers, such explorations command increasingly large audiences, proving that they are not merely revelatory but marketable as well. In a culture that many people perceive to be compromised by rampant inauthenticity, ethnic music satisfies a yearning for authentic, rooted expression. Yiddish music is no exception.

Yet, clearly, something more is going on here. Renewed interest in Yiddish music is part of a widespread reclaiming of Jewish identity in the arts: Steven Spielberg in Hollywood, Art Speigelman in what he calls his "cartoon novels." Generations removed from the immigrant Jews who hid their Jewish roots in exchange for acceptance in America, these artists, now securely American, pursue a heritage that more profoundly defines them, beyond their mere Americanness. In doing so they unapologetically embrace the rich, centuries-old, Jewish cultural otherness that as a grotesque stereotype has long fueled anti-Semitism.

For the Jewish songwriters who conquered Tin Pan Alley during the first half of this century, the fear of anti-Semitic exclusion made any backward glance anathema. "It's madness to be always sitting around in sadness, when you could be learning the Steps of Gladness," wrote Ira Gershwin (with B. G. de Sylva) in the 1922 song "Stairway to Paradise." An immigrant's mantra, to be sure: Why hold on to the past, the song urged, when you can learn to be an American and happiness will surely follow?

Yet, sadness and gladness are the twin emotions underlying much of the best music that emerged from Tin Pan Alley at this time. Wistful ambivalence undercuts exultation at every turn in the songs of Israel Baline (Irving Berlin), Hyman Arluck (Harold Arlen), Jacob Gershwine (George Gershwin) and so many other immigrant Jewish songwriters, darkening the attainment of happiness with the profundity of loss.

It is this skein of ambivalence that the Yiddish revivalists seek to unravel. When Mandy Patinkin sings "Oyfn Pripetshik," he is cutting through centuries of persecution in a spirit of triumph and celebration. Yet the essence of Jewish music has always been the capturing of Jewish suffering and loss in sound.

Musical tradition in Judaism is at least as old as the biblical word shira (song), used in scripture

to connote both poetry and music. With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, where singing and the playing of instruments were central to services, the tradition of the Hazzan, or cantor, evolved. The Hazzan is a designated prayer leader, versed in the liturgy, who chants aloud for the congregation. The artistry of his incantations reached a zenith in Eastern Europe, where masterful cantorial improvisers ecstatically ornamented the traditional melodic patterns (nusakh) in a musical style called fragesh. A sort of blues for Jews, fragesh progressions are major-scale compositions with haunting minor overtones. Their sense of yearning is an essential part of the harmonic vocabulary generically identified today as "Jewish." It is a music of longing and lamentation, the music of a people who, as the conductor Michael Tilson Thomas has observed, "once upon a time heard God's voice and are still waiting to hear it again."

YIDDISH music projects this sound overtly. But it has been a subliminal fact of American music throughout the 20th century. The composer and scholar Jack Gottlieb has spent more than 30 years sifting this presence to identify its components. In his view, the songs that Jews created for Tin Pan Alley represented a turnabout in the history of Jewish vocal music. "Whereas Jews in the past often assimilated melodic elements of a host culture into their sacred and secular music," he said, "Jews in 20th-century America, for the first time significantly contributed to the music of the mainstream."

It was a contribution made altogether surreptitiously. Sometimes songwriters merely reshaped an existing Yiddish song for American consumption, as in Sammy Cahn's and Saul Chaplin's swinging hit adaptation for the Andrews Sisters of the Yiddish composers Jacob Jacobs and Sholom Secunda's "Bei Mir Bist du Schon." More often, these songwriters drew on what Mr. Gottlieb calls "a reserve of idiomatic memories," piecing together new American songs from fragments of Yiddish melody.

The process could be fraught with anxiety. The Hollywood composer Bernard Hermann recalls George Gershwin expressing grave concern that audiences would find "Summertime," his operatic lullaby in "Porgy and Bess," "too Yiddish." Mr. Gottlieb speculates that Gershwin had drawn on an old Yiddish lullaby, "Lu, Lu Lulinki," whose melody powerfully echoes "Summertime," as does its lyric, beginning with the words: "What will Papa buy? A calf and a cow. Who will milk her? The Daddy? No, little baby. You and I."

This is a lullaby that today's Yiddish revivalists would perform without apology. Similarly, when Mr. Patinkin sings Abraham Ellstein and Jacob Jacob's "Alter Tzigayner" ("The Old Gypsy") juxtaposed with Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," Mr. Gottlieb's point is illustrated perfectly: Gypsy cadences and fragesh harmony yield to Americanized sentimentality. The transformation is complete.

The Brooklyn-born George Gershwin never composed for the Yiddish stage. Nor did Berlin, an

immigrant from Russia whose first language was Yiddish and whose early Tin Pan Alley songs included titles like "Yiddle on Your Fiddle, Play Some Ragtime." Yiddish music for both, nevertheless, retained a primal pull that, as Mr. Patinkin observes, is common to all ethnic music. "At first I didn't feel I had any history with this at all in terms of my own life," Mr. Patinkin conceded. "Then I began looking to follow the journey of these Jewish composers to America in terms of music and in terms of family. I realized I wanted to pay back my heritage. But beyond that, I believe this music has the power, for all of us, to say: 'Listen to my past and hear in it your past.' "

Yet, even for the revivalists, a certain religious reticence lingers. Yiddish music in America remains largely a secular matter -- hardly a correlative to contemporary Christian pop. For the Yiddish revivalists, like their Tin Pan Alley predecessors, the issue of religion is largely left offstage, yet another irony in this ongoing cycle of disavowal and reclamation. For beneath the surface, religious references abound in Yiddish music, as they did even on Tin Pan Alley.

Consider the American immigrant cantor's son who called himself Harold Arlen. He, no doubt, knew as much about Yiddish music as any of today's revivalists, yet his own music was far more celebrated for its jazz influences. Arlen also clearly knew quite a bit about Jewish liturgical music, including the traditional nusakh for the Kiddush, the benediction that generations of Jews have sung over wine to welcome the Sabbath every Friday night. Composed in 19th-century Poland by the cantor Louis Lewendowsky, its concluding words offer solace to a wandering nation: "Ki Vonu Bocharto V'otanu Kidashto Mikol Ha'amim" ("For You have chosen us and sanctified us above all nations.")

Unconsciously or not, Arlen invokes this nusakh as the opening for "It's Only a Paper Moon," one of his biggest hit tunes, written in 1932. With words supplied by a pair of immigrant sons, Isidore (Yip) Harburg (ne Hochberg) and Billy Rose (ne Rosenberg), a whimsical Depression-era declaration of love also comes to suggest a wishful invitation from God to a newly resettled people: "Say, it's only a paper moon/ Sailing over a cardboard sea/ But it wouldn't be make believe/ If you believed in me."

This yearning to believe is at the heart of all Jewish music. Whether it is expressed in Yiddish or in English, on Tin Pan Alley or in Eastern Europe, its survival powers are eternal. In his biography of Arlen, Edward Jablonski recounts an observer's witnessing the composer, who had a majestic cantorial voice himself, sing "Paper Moon" at a party. It was, he said, as if he were praying.

Photos: HEIRS TO A TRADITION -- A Yiddish-music renaissance, led by bands like the Klezmatics, left, has found its fullest expression in Mandy Patinkin's album "Mamaloshen" and his performances of the material, above. (Jack Vartoogian)(Joel Meyerowitz); IN TRANSIT -- Genres like Yiddish theater reached America intact, but were soon absorbed into other idioms.

(From the Collection of Jack Gottlieb)(pg. 32); OLD TIMES -- Itzhak Perlman explored Yiddish music on a 1996 album. (Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times)(pg. 36)

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