

Gnesin's Forgotten Music

Interview with Sovali by Sheila Gogol published in *Levend Joods Geloof* (Living Jewish Faith), the magazine of the Reform Jewish Congregation in Amsterdam - Sept. 2002.

“Gnesin and Chagall lived in St. Petersburg at the same time and were both modernists involved in giving the Russian Jewish soul a voice, one of them in music, the other in his paintings, but whether they ever actually shook hands ...”

Sovali, also known as Sofie van Lier, comes in like a whirlwind, her arms filled with piles of paper, books, CDs. The daughter of composer Bertus van Lier, singer and Master's in Musicology has now started on the project all her previous activities have been leading up to. As we sit and talk, we hear bits of strange and yet somehow familiar *nigguns* from a rehearsal CD of the ensemble she is about to perform her Gnesin programme with.

Who is Gnesin?

“Gnesin was a Russian Jewish composer in the first half of the twentieth century who composed magnificent music inspired by Jewish themes. He was a member of the *Society for Jewish Folk Music*, a club of Jewish composers founded in 1908 in St. Petersburg who - inspired by Rimsky-Korsakov - wanted to create a style of Jewish classical music. They wanted to call it the *Jewish Music Society*, but the official in charge of granting licences claimed there was no such thing as Jewish music, there was just Jewish folk music. They conducted research into traditional Jewish music - *chazzanut*, klezmer - they had a publishing firm, organized concerts, had a journal and a library. You see from the texts they chose for their songs how close their ties were to Zionism. Gnesin and some of the others also traveled to Palestine.”

Where did you get the idea of compiling a whole programme of Gnesin's music?

“I could have chosen one of the others, that will hopefully happen some time in the future. Via the Netherlands Consulate in New York, I was approached by the Tarbut Foundation to give a concert in their series *The Jews of Amsterdam in the Age of Rembrandt*. I came into contact with the singer Mascha Benya, who told me about Jewish composers in St. Petersburg in pursuit of their musical roots. At the time I myself was preparing a programme of works by 20th-century composers inspired by folk music, but I had never heard of these Jewish composers. I was curious and started looking for information. I found some books and articles at the library. It turned out to be a highly interesting movement that a wide range of people were active in: Joel Engel (the initiator), Solomon Rosowsky, Joseph Achron, Lazare Saminsky, Alexander and Grigory Krein, Moshe Milner, Alexander Vepruk, Gnesin and numerous others. It went on until the Revolution. They tried to move the Society to Berlin and they set up a publishing firm there in the early 1920s, Jibne Edition, Agency for the Diaspora. Then Engel went to Palestine, Achron, Rosowsky and Saminsky emigrated via Palestine to the United States. Gnesin and Krein went on with their work in Moscow until 1930, but it was not easy and under Stalin there was no chance for Jewish music at all. Vepruk wound up in a camp where he had to compose arrangements for a balalaika orchestra. A wall of silence arose around Moshe Milner, who was unwilling to abandon his intention to compose Jewish music. Gnesin went into teaching composition. The name is still known because of the famous conservatory in Moscow named after him, but the Jewish composer Gnesin has been forgotten. The composer and musicologist Abraham Yufin calls it ‘the era of the official non-existence of Jewish art music in Russia.’ Nowadays this music is still unknown.”

Was it difficult to find the scores?

“It certainly was. Here in Amsterdam I could only find a few instrumental pieces, no vocals. Mascha gave us a couple of songs. Our pianist Anat Fort found some work at the YIVO in

New York and my brother and our violinist Grigory Sedukh found some pieces in St. Petersburg. Our cellist Alexander Oratovski had quite a few pieces himself, but he could not get to them because he was constantly in the process of moving. The scores were stored. I had to beg him to go look thorough his boxes. Anat's sister also sent us some scores from Israel. There is still an awful lot that I am looking for, I don't have anywhere near all of the work"

How did you happen to choose Gnesin?

"My original idea was to compile a programme of work by various composers, but then I realized it would be too fragmented. Anat Fort and I decided to concentrate on Gnesin. He is extremely interesting. He wrote a wonderful cycle of songs called *The Story of Red-headed Mottele* to lyrics by Joseph Utkin. The lyrics are from the early days of Communism and rather naïve. They are about a little Jewish tailor who dreams of better days. It is not great poetry but the music is fantastic. Gnesin uses a style in this piece that he calls *musical declamation*. He bases the vocal melody on the tone changes and the rhythms of spoken language.

His Opus 37, *Jewish Songs*, is more inspired by folk melodies. There is a fragment there from *Shir Hashirim* (Song of Songs) and *Jad anuga haita la* (Her Tender Hand), a song Gnesin transcribed in 1923 during a journey to Palestine. It was a hit in Israel in the 1960s. There is also a Yiddish text, *Der Sojne ba di Tojern* and a song without words. We improvise on these songs. Gnesin also composed theatre music for Meyerhold's performance of Gogol's *Revisor* in Moscow, *Jewish Orchestra at the Ball of the City Mayor*. He called it a *Grotesque*, it is actually more of a parody of a klezmer orchestra. We are going to create our own version of it and improvise on it. Alexander Oratovski also plays some cello pieces and Grigory Sedukh plays a violin sonata. At the IJsbreker on 7 November, Marcel Worms will play a piano duet with Anat and he and Alexander and Grigory will do a piano trio by Gnesin. I correspond with Abraham Yusfin, a former student of Gnesin's and now a professor at the Jewish University of St. Petersburg. He will write the notes for our programme."

What about the group itself?

I initially began with Anat Fort from Israel. We were joined by more and more musicians from a wide variety of backgrounds, classical and improvising musicians, who felt a connection with this project. The cellist Alexander Oratovski had already given concerts of the Society's music, the violinist Grigory Sedukh from St. Petersburg was also working on this repertoire - I met him when he was here in Amsterdam to play a piece on the piccolo violin that was composed especially for him in the opera *Alice in Wonderland* at the Muziektheater. Then there is the virtuoso clarinet player Perry Robinson from New York and the percussionist Roberto Haliffi from Libya, who I played with in Klezmokum, and Arthur Baron, the renowned trombone player from New York, the last trombone player Duke Ellington hired for his orchestra in 1973, who also played with Giora Feidman.



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