

Tribute to Mikhail Gnesin

Sovali	soprano
Perry Robinson or Michel Marang	clarinet
Grigory Sedukh	violin
Alexander Oratovski	cello
Simon Nabatov or Paul Prenen	piano
Michael Vatcher	percussion

Programme

A Nigun fun Schajke-Pfaifer (1914) for cello and piano

Song of a Knight Errant, in memory of Süßkind von Trimberg - the Jewish minstrel from the 13th. century, Op. 34 (1921) for cello, piano

Jewish Songs, Op. 37 (1923-26) arr. for voice and ensemble by Alexander Oratovski (2002)
Her delicate hand (Zalmen Shneur)
Song of Mariamne (vocalise) to the tragedy "Herod and Mariamne" by Hebbel
From the Song of Songs (Chapter 8, Stanza 8-10 "We Have a Little Sister")
The enemy is at the gates (O. Schwartzman)

Sonata in G-Major, for violin and piano, Op. 43 (1928), arr. for piccolo-violin by Grigory Sedukh

Three Melodies for clarinet, violin, cello and piano Op. 60 (1942)
Gerèn's Song, based on a Turkmen melody
Ukrainean Dance
Lyric Intermezzo

- intermission -

Music for the "Story of red headed Mottele" by Josef Utkin, Op. 44 (1926-29) for voice, piano
Song about red headed Mottele
Who's business is it?
On the market
Standing in line
The clock" (Song of currant affairs)
In the Synagoge
Funeral Song
What is the answer" (thinking about life)

Jewish Orchestra on the Ball of the City Mayor (Grotesque), Op. 41 - incidental music for the performance of Gogol's "Revisor" at V.E. Meyerhold's theatre) (1926) - arr. for ensemble by Alexander Oratovski (2002)

programme subject to modifications

N.B. there are two versions of the programme, depending on the performing musicians: one is an integral classical performance; the other is with improvisations on themes by Gnesin.

Programme notes

In our world, with its advanced communication networks, we tend to think everything is known and the surprise of discovery has more or less disappeared. Yet, somehow there is always a forgotten corner somewhere. In our world, who ever heard a song, a cello sonata, or an orchestral piece by **Mikhail Fabianovich Gnesin** (1883-1957)? One seldom sees or hears this name on a concert hall program, in a radio broadcast, or on a CD. To this day, the name is connected with a famous conservatory in Moscow. The man who bore the name was known in the Soviet Union as an erudite composition teacher, and died an honored Soviet composer, but the Jewish composer Gnesin has been forgotten.

Mikhail Gnesin belonged to the Petersburg **Society of Jewish Folk Music** (founded in 1908), a group of composers devoted to the creation of Jewish classical music. The group was led by the music critic, composer and publisher Joel Engel (1862-1927). In addition to Gnesin, the composers included Joseph Achron (1886-1943), Alexander Krein (1883-1951), Moshe Milner (1886-1952), Solomon Rosowsky (1878-1962), Lazare Saminsky (1882-1959), Ephraim Skliar (1871- ?) and Alexander Wepruk (1899-1958). They did research on Jewish traditional music, published music scores and essays on Jewish music, organised musical events, issued a periodical, set up a library, and opened departments in other cities. The movement grew up under the influence of the nationalistic trends prevailing in Europe at the time, creating renewed interest in traditional musical styles. The breeding ground for the Petersburg Society was Rimsky-Korsakov's composition class at the conservatory attended by several members of the Society, where they were encouraged to explore their Jewish musical heritage.

A favorite student of Rimsky-Korsakov, the young composer Gnesin started out brilliantly with original works like his orchestra piece *Vrubel*, which won him the Glinka prize. Yet he found his true calling as a composer in the field of Jewish music. Gnesin wrote: "Elements of Jewish music captured my musical feelings and imagination to such an extent that even when I did not have the mission to look for a Jewish style, those elements appeared in my works (in Braun, J., *Jews in Soviet Music*, in: Miller, J., ed., *Jews in Soviet Culture*, p. 69). Gnesin's first Jewish work *A Nigun fun Shaikhe Pfaijer* was published in 1914 by the *Society for Jewish Folk Music*. Numerous compositions on Jewish themes followed, including arrangements of traditional material and original works ranging from the smaller forms of song and chamber music to the larger forms of symphony, choir and opera.

This inspired period lasted until Stalin's take-over cruelly terminated the renaissance of Jewish music in Russia. Boycotted by Stalin's cultural policy, eliminated from history, forgotten by the world, the scores yellowed in the archives just like those of his partners in adversity, and the memory of this music was only kept alive by a small group of initiates. "Many, too many composers and works (M. Gnesin... among others) are still patiently waiting for an encounter with their audience. It is to be hoped, that this waiting is not in vain" writes composer / musicologist Abraham Jusfin (A. Jusfin, *Unterdrückung und Verfolgung im Nach-Stalinismus*, in: J. Braun, ed., *Verfemte Musik*, p. 187).

Was it a coincidence? Who knows? This music came our way. In New York I met singer Mascha Benya Matz, an expert on Jewish repertoire. She showed me some songs by Gnesin and his group. The music was interesting and I understood immediately that here was an honorable and gratifying calling. Considered from an artistic, music-historical and political point of view, the creative work of Gnesin and his friends deserves recognition.

Sofie van Lier, Amsterdam, 20 October 2001

Bibliography

- Braun, Joachim, *Jews in Soviet Music*, in: Miller, Jack, ed., *Jews in Soviet Culture*, New Brunswick, London, Transaction Books, 1984
- Braun, Joachim; Hoffmann, Heidi Tamar; Karbusický, Vladimir, ed., *Verfemte Musik, Komponisten in den Diktaturen unseres Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang GmbH, 1995
- Ewen, David, *Hebrew Music*, New York, Bloch Publishing Company, 1931
- Gojowy, Detlef, *Neue sovjetische Musik der 20er Jahre*, Regensburg, Laaber-Verlag, 1980
- Gradenwitz, Peter, *The Music of Israel*, New York, Norton Publishing Co., 1949
- Heskes, Irene, *Passport to Jewish Music*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press
- Lemaire, Frans C., *La musique du XXe siècle en Russie et dans les anciennes Républiques soviétiques*, Editions Fayard, 1994
- Moisenco, Rena, *Twenty Soviet Composers*, London, Workers' Music Association, 1942
- Sabaneyeff, Leonid, *Modern Russian Composers*, New York, International Publishers, Inc., 1927 (Da Capo Press, 1975)
- Sabaneyeff, Leonid, *Die nationale jüdische Schule in der Musik*, Wien, Universal Edition, 1927
- Sitsky, Larry, *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-Garde, 1900-1929*, Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 1994
- Weisser, Albert, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*, New York, Bloch Publishing Co. Inc., 1954

