

Songs from St. Petersburg

a selection of the finest pieces by the Society of Jewish Folk music

Sovali, soprano and Paul Prenen, piano

Programme

Moshe Milner (1886-1953)

Tsen Kinderlider fun I.L. Perets for voice and piano

Vigliid (Cradle Song)

Ketsele, shtil (Pussycat, Quiet)

A gute nacht (Good Night)

Der foygl (The Bird)

Der shifer (The Skipper)

Breytele (Bread Roll)

Tantz, tantz, meydele, tantz (Dance, Dance, Girl, Dance)

Der jeger (The Hunter)

Bal-shpil (Ball Game)

Oyfn grinem bergele (On the Green Mountain)

Alexander Veprik (1899-1958)

Dances, op.13 for piano (1927-1928)

Kaddish, for voice and piano, Op. 6

Two Jewish Songs, for voice and piano, Op. 8

Sayt gesunterheyt (Bless You)

Spatziren saynen mir gegangen (We went out strolling)

- intermission -

Mikhail Gnesin (1883-1957)

Jewish Songs, Op. 37

Yad anuga haita la (Her hand was tender)

Pesenka Mariamnyi (Song of Mariamne)

Shir hashirim (From the Song of Songs)

Der soyne ba di toyern (The Enemy is at the Gates)

Joseph Achron (1886-1943)

Excerpts from **Children's Suite, Op. 57** (1923) for piano

Two Songs, Op. 52

Yom, yom ani holech limonech (Everyday I go to your house) (Fichmann)

Canzonetta (Avram ben Jizchak)

Alexander Krein (1883-1951)

Incidental Music Na Pokajannoi Tsepi (Penalty Chain) (L. Perets) for piano

Voloch (Bessarabian Piece)

Svadebnii March (Wedding March)

Two Jewish Songs, Op. 39

Vigliid (Cradle Song)

May (May)

(programme subject to modifications)

Programme Notes

In 1908 a group of Jewish composers in St.-Petersburg, Russia, founded the *Society for Jewish Folk Music*. The society “was meant to be a meeting place for young talented Jewish composers interested in composing classical Jewish music” (J. Achron). Its aims were to be active in researching and developing Jewish music by collecting folk songs, promoting and supporting Jewish composers, printing essays on Jewish music, organizing musical events, founding a library, issuing a periodical, and spreading its activities to other cities in Russia. The initiators were the music critic, composer, and publisher Joel Engel (1862-1927) and the composers Ephraïm Skliar (1871-?) and Solomon Rosowsky (1878-1962); the most important composers were Lasare Saminsky (1882-1959), Joseph Achron (1886-1943), Moses Milner (1886-1953), Michael Gnesin (1883-1957), and Alexander Krein (1883-1951).

The movement matured under the influence of the nationalistic trends prevailing in Europe at the time, creating renewed interest in traditional musical styles, as is witnessed by the works of Stravinsky, Bartók, Debussy, Ravel, and Falla. Jewish music was a topic of interest for various composers including Ernest Bloch in Switzerland and Darius Milhaud in France. The breeding ground for the Petersburg group was Rimsky-Korsakov’s composition class at the conservatory that was attended by several of these composers attended and where they were encouraged to explore their musical Jewish heritage.

In a relatively short period of time, the members of the St. Petersburg *Society* created a sizable body of works, arrangements of traditional as well as original music ranging from small songs and chamber music pieces to larger symphonies, choral works and operas. In addition, together with the St. Petersburg *Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society*, they helped create a valuable collection of Jewish folk songs.

The St. Petersburg *Society* officially remained in existence for ten years. Due to the political situation, it ceased functioning in 1918, although some of its activities continued until 1922. The members went their separate ways and continued their work dispersed all across the globe. Joel Engel went via Berlin to Palestine, Rosowsky, Saminsky, and Achron ultimately immigrated to the U.S., Gnesin, Milner, and Krein stayed in the Soviet Union, where for a while they continued the movement as *The New Jewish School*, with Moscow as its center. After 1930 however, Stalin’s culture policy made Jewish culture no longer wanted in the Soviet Union. The music of the *Society* was no longer performed and the memories of it were erased.

The Composers

Moshe Milner (1886-1953) studied with cantors Nissan Belser and Jakov Morogovsky, and pianist Abram Dzmirtowsky at the synagogue in Kiev. He continued his piano studies at Kiev Conservatory and St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he studied piano and composition with Anatoly Lyadov and Maximilien Steinberg (1907-15). His first compositions were published by the St. Petersburg *Society for Jewish Folk Music*, which he joined at the start in 1908. His early songs, such as *In cheder* (At School) (1914) became popular. His music was performed at concerts in Leningrad and New York (1917, 1921, 1922 and 1938).

Milner’s music is permeated with the spirit of Eastern European Jewry and characterized by Yiddish speech patterns. His main focus is on vocal music, but he also composed piano, chamber, orchestral and incidental music. He wrote the libretto and music for the first Yiddish opera *Die himlen brenen* (1923), which was prohibited by the Soviet censors after the second performance. Two later operas *Anschel* and *Josephus Flavius* were never performed. Milner refused to conform to the party line, which resulted in his expulsion from musical life in the Soviet Union.

Zehn kinderlider fun Y.L. Perets for voice and piano (1922) are poetic settings of children’s poems by the Polish-Jewish poet Yitschak Leyb Perets. Each song has its own atmosphere with a specific Jewish, melancholy undertone.

The Ukrainian pianist and composer **Alexander Veprik** (1899-1958) grew up in Warsaw and studied piano under Wending at Leipzig Conservatory until 1914. With the outbreak of WW I the Veprik family was obliged to return to Russia. Veprik continued his studies at St. Petersburg Conservatory with Dubasov (piano; 1914-17) and Alexander Zhitomirsky (composition; 1917-20). He was a pupil of Myaskovsky at Moscow Conservatory from 1920 to 1923.

Veprik was a musical education reformer in the 1920s, when he joined a faction of *Red Professors*. He occupied important positions in Soviet musical life and taught orchestration at Moscow Conservatory (1923-41), where he became a professor in 1930 and head of the faculty in 1938. He initiated the invitation to Arnold Schönberg to head the composition class at Moscow

Conservatory in 1925 (which he refused). Veprik traveled in 1927 to Austria, Germany and France, where he studied methods of teaching orchestration and met Schönberg, Hindemith, Ravel and Honegger. He was an editor of the St. Petersburg journal called *Melos* (1917-18) and the periodical *Muzikal'noye obrazovaniye* (Music Education) (1925-9). Starting in 1929, he was a member of the State Academy for Arts Research. In the controversy concerning Shostakovich' opera *Lady Macbeth* (1938), he courageously defended Shostakovich. In 1940 Veprik was sent to Kirghizye, where he regenerated Kirghyzian music. He spent the years 1950 to 1954 in a prison camp in the Ural.

Most of Veprik's works are written in an emotional, ornamented manner that clearly shows his inclination towards the Jewish school. He wrote orchestral music, choir, chamber and piano music, an opera, and songs. In *Dances* for piano, Op. 13 Veprik incorporates the Jewish elements in a dissonant, bi-tonal harmonic texture. *Kaddish*, Op. 6 is a vocalization with an elegiac quality (*Kaddish* is the prayer for creation and the dead). *Two Jewish Songs* for voice and piano, Op. 8 are arrangements of traditional folk songs (the first of which is better known as *Der obshit*). Veprik's harmonies add a tragic quality to the melodies.

Michail Gnesin (1883-1957) attended St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he was Rimsky-Korsakov's favorite pupil. His other teachers were Glazunov and Lyadov. His career as a composer started out brilliantly and his early music inspired by the Symbolist movement was performed by famous musicians such as Pablo Casals. He was active at Meyerhold's St. Petersburg Studios (1912-13), where he developed new ideas concerning a declamatory singing style. He founded a conservatory in his home town Rostov-on-Don after the Revolution.

Gnesin found his true calling as a composer in the field of Jewish music. He co-founded the *Society of Jewish Folk Music* in 1908 and traveled to Palestine in 1914 and 1922 to research Jewish music. He sought to penetrate the essence of the Jewish melody and composed many works inspired by Jewish musical traditions: symphonic works, choirs, chamber music and songs, and the opera-poem *Abraham's Youth*. Although his Jewish music was not favored by the Soviet party line, and there was a threat of reprisals, Gnesin became an important music theoretician and teacher in Russia. He taught at the conservatories in Leningrad and Moscow, and at the Gnesin Academy in Moscow, where he trained many Soviet composers. He defied the wrath of the authorities when he publicly stood up for Shostakovich and Prokofiev when they were accused of *formalism* in 1948. He received the title Honored Art Worker of the RSFSR in 1927, an arts doctorate in 1943, and the States Prize in 1946.

In *Jewish Songs* for voice and piano, op. 37 (1923-1926), Gnesin developed the traditions of Musorgsky, creating realistic musical pictures and embodying scenes from the ancient and modern history of the Jewish people. *There is no hand more tender* is an arrangement of an Arabian tune recorded by Gnesin in Palestine in 1921. The Jewish text is by Zalman Shneur. *Song of Mariamne* (for the tragedy by Hebbel *Herod and Mariamne*) is a vocalization with a melodic structure based on archaic intonations of the most ancient Jewish tunes. *From the Song of Songs* (Chapter 8, stanza 8-10, "We have a little sister") is a playful song and includes some melodic elements of Jewish dances. *The Enemy is at the Gates* on lyrics by Osher Shwarzman flagellates the instigators of the pogroms. Its melodious language is based on the combination of a synagogal recitative and a Jewish song. (For more information see *Tribute to Mikhail Gnesin* – programme text A.Yusfin).

The violinist and composer **Joseph Achron** (1886-1943) was a pupil of Leopold Auer at St. Petersburg Conservatory (1899-1904). He joined the *Society of Jewish Folk Music* in 1911. He was conductor of the violin and chamber music classes at the Music School of the Imperial Russian Music Society in Kharkov (1913 –16), and served in the Russian Army until 1918. He was conductor of the Master Class of Violin and Chamber Music at the Petrograd Art Society (1921-22). The next two years he spent abroad, mostly in Berlin. He emigrated in 1925 to the United States, where he later befriended Arnold Schönberg.

Achron elaborated on the contrapuntal possibilities of Jewish melodies. He continuously sought renewal in his music and experimented with early twentieth-century trends. He left behind a large oeuvre, mostly related to Jewish themes. In addition to numerous violin pieces, he wrote songs (some for his wife Marie, who was a singer), chamber and orchestral music and incidental music for the Jewish theater and film.

Achron's settings of Fichmann's and Avram ben Jizchak's lyrics in *Two Songs* for voice and piano, Op. 52 have a religious undertone, and are simultaneously still and ecstatic. *The Children's Suite* for piano, Op. 57 "consists of 20 Miniatures-Primitives founded on the so-called 'Trop' (old

Synagogue Chant, sung during the reading of the Torah (Bible), used quite freely" (foreword Universal Edition).

The cellist and composer **Alexander Krein** (1883-1951) studied cello with Glehn at Moscow Conservatory, and composition with Nikolayev and Yavorski. As Secretary for Modern Music in the Commission for Folklore (1918-21) and a member of the editorial board of the State Publishing House (from 1922 onwards), he held important positions in Soviet musical life. In that capacity he tried to protect the music of his Jewish colleagues as long as he could. In 1934 he was awarded the title of Honored Artist.

Krein's familiarity with Jewish music dated back to early childhood. His father was a well-known klezmer musician and folk poet who played the violin at Jewish weddings accompanied by his children on zymbales. Five of the seven Krein children became musicians.

Krein wrote many works assimilating the ornamental synagogue laments and Jewish folk melodies in a harmonic language that is close to Scriabin's. He wrote music for orchestra, choir, chamber, piano, song, and incidental music. To please the authorities, he had to turn to non-Jewish subjects too. None of his Jewish works are mentioned in the *Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary of Music*.

Krein's compelling Jewish melodies and colorful harmonies resound in the Bessarabian piano piece *Voloch* and the *Wedding March* he wrote for Perets' play *Na Pokajannoï Tsepi* (Penalty Chain). *Two Songs*, for voice and piano Op. 39, have a simple folk like quality. In *Vigliid* with lyrics by Izzy Charik, a mother tells her child about the hard life awaiting him as a Jew. In the early Communist song *Mai* with lyrics by A. Kushnirrov, the protagonist expresses his optimism about life in the new state.

Sofie van Lier
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