

Musical Heroes

CD review by Jan Waas in the NIW (Dutch Jewish Weekly), October 23, 2009

With her work soprano Sovali (Sofie van Lier) erects a lasting monument to Jewish Soviet composers who had to work in secret during the Stalin Regime.

Sovali and her Jewish Music Projects have released three CDs.

On the first CD *Sun and Rain – Zun mit a Regn*, she and the Sovali Consort perform the art songs of a trio of friends, only one of whom, Dmitri Shostakovich, is well known. Mieczyslaw Weinberg (Moisei Vainberg) set Yiddish poems by Perets and Halkin to music. Veniamin Basner wrote the score for the Russian-Jewish musical *Jewish Luck*.

As initiator Sofie van Lier notes, "It was often years before the works could be premiered. Some scores never left the composers' desk drawers or remained buried in archives." Friends helped Sovali put these unknown art songs on the music stand again. Nowadays, with Yiddish operetta and folk songs frequently performed in the klezmer revival, there is finally attention for the Jewish art song.

On the second CD *Curtain Call for the St. Petersburg Jewish Music Society (1908) – 100th anniversary*, Sovali is accompanied by pianist Paul Prenen. A century ago a group of composers founded the Jewish Folk Music Society in St. Petersburg, Russia. It came to an end in the 1930s under the Stalin regime. The Society collected the Jewish folk music of Russia, made classical arrangements of it and also wrote original works. For this CD, Sofie van Lier chose music by Moshe Milner, Joseph Achron, Mikhail Gnesin, Alexander Veprik, and Alexander Krein.

The first CD *Sun and Rain* includes poems by Y.-L. Perets set to music by Weinberg, and the second CD opens with the same poems, now in the setting by Milner called *Vocal Cycle Mother and Child*. It is nice to draw a comparison... In addition five non-Zionist Hebrew songs by Achron were recorded, *Song of Songs* compositions by Gnesin, and arrangements of traditional songs and dances by Veprik and Krein including some from the collection of the ethnomusicologist Moshe Beregovski.

Everything has been carefully done with good transcriptions of the Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian lyrics, and translations, so the contents are accessible to everyone. The Sovali-Prenen duo gave a magnificent performance of the music, full of love for the material they found.

The third CD in the Jewish Music Projects series recently appeared. This one is dedicated to the oeuvre of Mikhail Gnesin. In 1927 Gnesin was presented with the title of Honored Art Worker of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic, but under the Stalin Regime his works were put away. With this recording Sofie van Lier aims at reviving the interest in the unjustly forgotten composer.

As early as 1914 and 1921 Gnesin ventured on study trips to Palestine. One of the songs he took down at the time was *Yad Anuga*. The lyrics had been written in 1908 by Zalman Shne'ur in London and later became popular in Palestine sung to a Bedouin melody. *(H)Ora* is Gnesin's adaptation of *El Yivne Hagalil*, a well-known pioneer song. The CD includes the complete song cycle *Music to the Story of Red-headed Mottele* by Joseph Utkin, and music composed for theatre performances such as Gogol's *Revisor*. Cellist Alexander Oratovski arranged the suite *Jewish Orchestra at the Ball of the City Mayor* as a nice klezmer cycle of Yiddish dances especially for the Sovali Consort.

The Milken Archive presents itself on the Naxos label with American Jewish music. The Sovali Consort emphasizes that in the Soviet Union, too, Jewish classical music was composed, even though it was mostly done furtively. And Sovali's masterful performance of these works deserves wide recognition!

The Sovali Consort: *Sun and Rain* / JMP CD 001; *Curtain Call* / JMP CD 002; *Tribute to Mikhail Gnesin* / JMP CD 003. For more information, see: www.joodsemuziekprojecten.nl.