

CELLIST ALEXANDER ORATOVSKI PERFORMS JEWISH MUSIC

Article by Abram Yusfin, Professor at the St. Petersburg Jewish University, composer and musicologist.

In the summer of 1994, traveling through the towns of Ukraine, I saw the remnants of past Jewish life. I listened to the few survivors of the last war, and recorded their tragic memories, their songs, and dances. I became convinced once again that the spirit of a people, its will to live, is invincible and indestructible.

Listening to the Jewish music - so recognizable and yet so different - performed by the excellent cellist Alexander Oratovski, I involuntarily recalled my recent trip: the microcosm of the almost extinguished Jewish life was recreated by the musician in all its magnitude and its variegated colors.

Yet, not only did my trip to Ukraine come to my mind. There was more. I have lived in this world for a long time, and there is much to contemplate. I was destined to witness the last scintillas of the fading Jewish life that existed before World War II, and the catastrophe of the Shoah; to experience the consequences of anti-Semitic policies, being cast as a “rootless cosmopolitan”; to see the first beginnings of the rebirth of a people with its own traditions and culture. And to be among those who revived - despite the stupid resistance of the authorities - the Jewish Music Society and the Hebrew University in St.Petersburg; to see the happy eyes of its first students, and the first audiences of the Jewish music concerts.

It is well known that Jews, like some other peoples, show a particular inclination to music. I think that this is not a coincidence. The main reason for this is the principle of the physical non-representability of the Creator, which is the essence of Judaism. For many centuries, the purely spiritual concept of Him has fostered abstract artistic consciousness, and in this respect, music has been the ideal means of creative self-expression.

However, the destiny of Jewish music was such that it was only at the end of the 19th Century in Russia - where at that time 70% of the global Jewish population lived – that the prerequisites arose for a Jewish composer's school to emerge. Notwithstanding the “percentage norm” that existed in Russia at that time for Jews entering higher education institutions, the founder of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Anton Rubinstein, managed to have it retracted for his conservatory. Thanks to this exception, many Jewish composers emerged in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1908, the "Society for Jewish Folk Music" was founded in St. Petersburg. Its members collected and edited folk songs and dances, and composed works in different genres based on Jewish folk themes. They also organized Jewish music concerts. For the first time in the history of Jewish culture, a true Jewish composer's school had emerged.

After the Revolution of 1917, the Society ceased to exist, and everything related to its existence was forgotten for many years. It was only in the late 1980s that the interest in Jewish music began to resurge.

In 1988, Alexander Oratovski made a number of arrangements of Jewish songs and dances for the Jewish song ensemble "Friling" of which he himself was a member. After the first performance, the musicologist Marina Goldina introduced Oratovski to M. D. Tendler, who was a family member of Jozef Achron - one of the composers of the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music. She had sheet music of the composers of the Society, and soon a concert took place where these works were performed. The introductory words were spoken by Marina Goldina. She published a paper on the history of the Society in the same year. Sometime later, she immigrated to the United States, and the introductory words for the next concert happened to be spoken by the author of these lines.

Not long after, Oratovski also left Russia. He moved to Holland in 1990. There, using the bulk of materials he brought from St. Petersburg, he prepared a new programme with music by the composers of the Society. He was not only their interpreter, but also the author of a meaningful and professionally competent commentary on them.

The program included my piece "We", built on a polyphonic combination of song and dance. Listening to Oratovski's interpretation of it, I discovered new things that the author had not intended to express: the homonymous contrast of two genres sounded like a much more significant idea of unity and contradiction of the Jewish world.

In the concert, A. Oratovski proved himself not only as a performer and as researcher, but also as the author of the very lively and unconstrained adaptation of the Jewish dance "Skochna" that concluded the program convincingly.