The Jewish forward
Raiding the Archive: Bringing Klezmer to the Masses Once Again

By Ezra Glinter

It’s a truism of traditional music that in order to go forward, you have to go back. To innovate on old material, you have to know the old material in the first place.

But in the case of Yiddish music, there’s often not much to go back to. During the heyday of Yiddish culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, klezmer melodies, Yiddish theater tunes and cantorial music were popular entertainments for Jews from Warsaw to New York. But with the Holocaust in Europe and the rapid assimilation of Jewish immigrants in America, that culture went away as quickly as it had come. For musicians today who want to learn the Yiddish repertoire, finding a living link to that centuries-old musical tradition is nearly impossible.

But there is another way. Between 1898 and 1942, some 6,000 78-rpm recordings of Jewish music were produced in the United States, and some 5,000 in Europe. When Jewish musicians in the 1970s revived the Yiddish music that had largely disappeared after the Second World War, it was to those recordings that they turned.

“If it weren’t for these historic recordings, there wouldn’t have been a klezmer revival,” said producer Henry Sapoznik, executive director of Living Traditions, a Yiddish arts organization that produces the annual weeklong KlezKamp in Kerhonkson, N.Y. “Of every traditional music scene, whether it’s Balkan or Greek or blues or early jazz, the only one that relied completely on using 78s as a style and repertoire model was the klezmer scene.”

“Cantors, Klezmorim and Crooners 1905–1953: Classic Yiddish 78s From the Mayrent Collection,” a new three-CD boxed set, expands both the quantity and variety of archival Yiddish recordings available to seasoned musicians and casual listeners alike. The release of the collection by Living Traditions and JSP Records celebrates the 25th anniversary of KlezKamp, which ran in 2009 from December 23 to December 29. In keeping with the practical function of these recordings, they were incorporated into KlezKamp’s many instructional workshops.

“In the past few decades, however, music archivists and producers such as Sapoznik have begun remastering and releasing some of that material on CD and in other digital formats, making it available to anyone who wants it. To date, however, the bulk of the reissued material has been instrumental music, passing over equally prominent genres such as Yiddish theater and cantorial music. Additionally, much of the reissued material is repeated on several albums, leaving the vast majority of the original 78s untouched.
In both of these respects, “Cantors, Klezmorim and Crooners” breaks new ground. The collection got started in 2004, when Sherry Mayrent, a klezmer clarinetist and the associate director of Living Traditions, bought 100 Jewish 78s for $40 on eBay Inc. Mayrent got hooked on collecting, and now she owns more than 5,000 discs — the largest private collection of Yiddish 78s in the world. With the partnership of Sapoznik and Grammy Award-winning engineer Christopher King, Mayrent used her collection to create the new 67-track CD set.

“I had a dream that I would be able to make this stuff available,” she told the Forward. “The fact is that I’ve never heard any Yiddish recording of any quality that I haven’t learned something from.”

The collection encompasses a wide range of styles and genres that seem somewhat haphazard at first listen. On the first disc, an operatic performance of “Kol Nidre” by Cantor Selmar Cerini — one of the first cantors to make Jewish liturgical music a quasi-operatic art form — is immediately followed by a performance of “Katinka” by Yiddish theater star Molly Picon. But according to Sapoznik, it is precisely these juxtapositions that make this set valuable.

“It reinforces the interrelationship of one genre to another,” he said. “You get a chance to hear klezmer elements in cantorial singing, or cantorial phrasings in Yiddish theater songs. There was a lot of stuff that was obvious and clear to the original consumers of these records, which is not as clear today, which is why we used this kind of sequencing.”

The result is a collection that is both canonical and idiosyncratic, that both serves as an introduction to the uninitiated and presents new material for those who think they’ve heard it all. Tunes played by such legendary klezmer musicians as Naftule Brandwein, Dave Tarras and Abe Schwartz are presented alongside such obscure and forgotten artists as the Russisch-Judische Orchestra, a group whose recordings were imported from Europe by Columbia Records prior to World War I, though nothing is known about it outside of a single entry in a 1914 record catalog.

Other gems in the collection include a performance by Cantor Alter Yechiel Karniol in the zogekhts (speaking) 19th-century cantorial style, which, Sapoznik writes in his notes, is one of a few tracks that “cross the line between the commercial studio recordings they are and the field recordings they sound like.” Another rarity is a recording from 1915 of writer Sholom Aleichem reading “If I Were a Rothschild.”

“Reading a few lines from ‘Ven Ikh Bin Rotshild’ he stops,” Sapoznik writes, “prompting the engineer to call out ‘Is that all you got?’… Ten months later Sholom Aleichem died. When his funeral attracted a staggering 500,000 people, [RCA] Victor hurriedly rushed out the failed test record. When it did not sell it was soon dropped from the catalog, making the record one of the most important and rarest of all Yiddish commercial recordings.”

For all the material contained on “Cantors, Klezmorim and Crooners,” however, the CDs barely scratch the surface of Mayrent’s collection, which is why she plans to continue to remaster the records and release them all online.

A step in this process will be the recently-announced foundation of the Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture to be permanently located on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Sapoznik will head the new institute which will be dedicated to helping understand the world of Yiddish through its arts.

Extensive music projects are also being pursued elsewhere. Florida Atlantic University’s Judaica Sound Archives has been collecting Jewish music of all kinds since 2002, and provides much of it in streaming...
format on its Web site and more through research stations located in libraries throughout the United States, Canada, Israel and the United Kingdom.

These projects, however, have to contend with copyright laws which protect any recordings made after 1923. But Sapoznik is optimistic that they will eventually be able to release all of the material, much of which is now owned by such corporations as Bertelsmann and Sony.

"I think the tide is turning," Sapoznik said. "It is sort of ironic that the Germans and Japanese own almost all recordings made in America prior to World War II — for the American people not to have access to their own national sound heritage. But I'm very optimistic that this is going to change."

In the meantime, however, "Cantors, Klezmorim and Crooners" provides unprecedented access to a world and a musical tradition well worth holding onto.

_Ezra Glinter is the books editor of Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture._
Whitt: Where did you go to high school? What year did you graduate?

Borchers: I went to Russia Local High School in Russia, Ohio, a small town.

I graduated in 1992, a long time ago.

Whitt: What sports did you play in high school?

Borchers: I played all the sports that our school offered for boys — basketball, baseball, track and cross country.

Whitt: I take it the school was pretty small, so did most of the guys who played one sport tend to play two or three as well, or all sports? Is that fair to say?

Borchers: I only had eight guys in my graduating class. It’s a very small school. The track team had four guys on the whole team, so it’s really small.

There were three guys that were in my class that went out for basketball. So we weren’t picking from many grades to make a team.

Whitt: Which of the sports you mentioned was your favorite? Why?

Borchers: Basketball was my favorite because it takes into account, I say it’s like a microcosm of life really, basketball and I suppose other sports are this, but there’s teamwork, there is winning and losing.

There is the guy who scores all the points who gets all the accolades, and there’s the other guy who sets the screen and gets the assist and doesn’t get the accolades, and that’s kind of like life — winning and losing games, dealing with that, the highs and the lows and how to do that humbly.

I think it just teaches you a lot about life so, I think some of the other sports do, but basketball did it for me.

Whitt: What did you enjoy most about playing basketball?
Borchers: Certainly the teamwork, getting to know my teams and building a team, like I said, it’s something that carries the rest of your life, in work, in school and family. All the relationships you have in your life.

(It) is learning how to draw on each others’ strengths and weaknesses and fill in where other people aren’t as strong, and you are in your strengths.

Whitt: What was your favorite class in high school?

Borchers: That would be easy, that’s math, trigonometry specifically.

Whitt: What did you enjoy most about studying trigonometry?

Borchers: Probably the teacher, Dr. Knapke, I’d say he was most folks’ favorite teacher even still today — Doctor, as he’s known affectionately, just simply Doctor.

He teaches more about life in addition to math.

But trigonometry uses spatial skills, which came easy to me, and I out-proved him once on a theorem.

We had to do it in five steps, I did it in four and he was kind of shocked, and I still remember that.

Whitt: Where did you go to college? What was your major?

Borchers: Well, actually I have three degrees. I have an associate’s degree in real estate and property management. I have an undergraduate degree in science from the University of Dayton, which is what I consider my alma mater, and I also have an MBA, Master of Business (Administration) from Florida Atlantic University, and I’m still working on my Master’s of Accounting, so still going to school ... yes, lifelong learning.

Whitt: What attracts you to learning as a lifelong pursuit?

Borchers: I guess it just comes from never feeling like you know it all.

I’m always hungry for more information, and the more classes I’ve taken I find that they apply to all aspects of my life, not just business, especially the management skills — learn how to manage my own life, learn how to manage my family, learn how to manage business as well.

But it’s very applicable to all parts of my life, which is why I like to keep going to school.

Whitt: If you had a chance to meet a historical figure, who would it be? Why?
Borchers: It would probably be my maternal, my mother’s dad, so my maternal grandfather.

He passed away when I was 2 years old, and I never got to form a relationship with him, and I got to know my paternal grandfather really well and he was very wise.

They were both born in 1914. They lived through the Depression.

Maybe they weren’t especially educated like I’m doing, but they were probably much, much wiser than me and there is a lot I could learn from them. I really enjoyed their company, so I would like to meet him.

Whitt: So if you met your grandfather, what would you most like to ask?

Borchers: I would like to ask him about his childhood growing up, coming through the Depression.

You can read in books how it was and that tells you how it was and that tells you how it was for the whole class of people, but to get a sense for how it was for an individual I think would be really interesting — especially someone that had an affect on my mother and it trickled down the line and probably affected me.

I’m interested in finding out more about him. I would also ask him about my mother when she was growing up and her days and the stuff she doesn’t tell me. (smiling)

Whitt: To this point in your life, who has been the most important or influential person? Why?

Borchers: There have probably been quite a few people that have influenced me, but I would say that’s easy. At the end of the day it comes back to my parents.

They’re probably the most influential because they’re with me through thick and thin and have seen me in all my glory and not-so-glorious moments.

Whitt: What is the biggest lesson that you have learned from your parents?

Borchers: That they’ve loved me through all of my trials and tribulations, especially through the challenging teen and adolescent years.

And I’m sure they didn’t always love the things I did, but they always liked me and I could feel that presence when I would drift away from them.

It always drew me back to them, and today we have an amazing relationship and it’s because of the way they always loved me through all the good times and bad times.
Whitt: You are an assistant coach for the varsity boys’ basketball program here at the high school. What is the biggest lesson that you want a kid who plays for you and Coach Hoppe to take away from their experience with you as their coach?

Borchers: The biggest lesson that I would like them to take away is you can achieve a lot through hard work, and that comes in the times when nobody’s looking. It's easy to go out and play hard when there is a big crowd or it’s a tournament or playoff game.

But it’s hard to do the day-to-day when nobody’s watching. It’s just you and nine other guys in the gym and a couple coaches. But when you do that, the results really show when everybody is watching.

I think also I want them to take away the fact that we care about them more than just winning and losing basketball games, that we will be here for them.

They can pick up the phone and call me in a year, in 10 years and I'd be happy to spend time with them. I really like these guys.

Whitt: What is the biggest lesson that you’ve learned from your wife?

Borchers: Ooh, boy! I tell my wife all the time that she is the perfect woman for me because she finds all my weak spots and areas I need to improve and reveals them to me.

She’s kind of like my parents, where she loves me even when I don’t do the right things. What more could you ask for in a wife, really, at the end of the day?

You know I’m not going to be perfect, but when I make mistakes she still loves me and the patience that she has with me is what makes me want to be a better husband. She really inspires me.

Whitt: You and your wife are proud parents. What is the biggest lesson that you and your wife have learned since becoming parents?

Borchers: It’s a newfound appreciation for what our parents did for us.

We knew it would be challenging, and it is. It's challenging, but it’s worth every moment. But it’s a huge sacrifice.

You take everything you had in your life, all the priorities, they are still in the same order, they just all slid down one.

Malachi goes to slot No. 1 ... and his middle name is Urban, after my paternal grandfather, who I knew so well.