A SHIDUKH FUN HIML :
78rpm Yiddish Recordings in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Yiddish culture was for much of its history primarily transmitted orally. Unfortunately, the massive migration of many of the Yiddish-speaking Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the destruction of the remainder during the Holocaust broke that chain of cultural transmission nearly irrevocably. As a result, an important aspect of Jewish identity was nearly lost as well. While 78rpm recordings offer us access to generations who never had a chance to transmit their knowledge in person, the availability of this material has been limited and often of diminished quality. This presentation explores how 21st-century technology has enabled me to assemble a large, comprehensive collection of Yiddish/Hebrew 78rpm recordings, and digital recording techniques make it possible to transfer music from them and disseminate those transfers without loss of quality. And using the Internet, we can make these invaluable resources accessible to anyone who wants to learn from them.

Yiddish culture, like most other folk traditions, was for much of its history primarily transmitted orally. Each generation would pass down to the next the important aspects of everything from prayer to foodways. Music was certainly taught in that way; would-be *cantors* apprenticed with eminent *khazonim* and in many families there were *klezmorim* who learned repertoire and the tricks of their trade from their grandfathers, fathers and uncles What distinguishes Yiddish culture from that of other national or ethnic groups, particularly in this country, is the extent to which the chain of cultural transmission was broken, nearly irrevocably.

Between 1880 and 1924, over 2 million[1] Yiddish speakers left Eastern Europe for the dream of a better life in America. In this they were no different from millions of other immigrants from all over the world. What was different, however, was the eagerness of the Jewish immigrants to embrace the language and cultural trappings of their new home. In her book *Yiddish: A Nation of Words*, Miriam Weinstein cites studies showing

> that Jews were among the fastest of all immigrant groups to drop their native tongues. The 1940 U.S. Census measured how much of the second and third generation still spoke the "Old World" language. Out of a field of 18 different immigrant groups, Yiddish, a culture with a great tradition, came in almost at the bottom, an amazing fifteenth.

> One explanation is that, by and large, Yiddish-speaking immigrants had a very different relationship with the countries they had left behind than did immigrants from, for example, Italy or Sweden. Yiddish speakers fled not only grinding poverty but governments that ranged from indifferent to hostile to, by the time of that study, genocidal.[2]

Another explanation, offered by historian Gerald Sorin, is that the Eastern European Jewish migration represented an unprecedented uprooting of an entire people.

> Greeks, Finns, non-Jewish Russians, and Italians were certainly in motion during these years, and significant numbers of them came to the United States. But none of these groups migrated as a people. Most came from independent nations and represented only a very small percentage of the societies they left behind. Moreover, large numbers of them (approximately 30 percent) returned to their homelands after a sojourn in the United States. Jews, on the other hand, left their old countries at a stunningly high rate: 33 percent of the Jewish population left Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1920, and after 1905 only 5 to 8 percent returned. This collective movement of a people was an extraordinary, if not wholly unprecedented, event.[3]

It may seem as though both freedom from the limitations and persecutions of antisemitism and the presence of huge numbers of fellow Jews would encourage the flourishing of Yiddish culture in its new setting, and indeed, the first three decades of the 20th century saw a flourishing of all forms of Yiddish expression in the United States. However, in a cruel twist of irony, the openness and acceptance of the new world ultimately destroyed that culture as thoroughly as the ravages of the Holocaust would soon destroy it in the old world, as the greenhorns eagerly sought to be become Americans. And nowhere was that desire so clear as among Jewish musicians. Ethnomusicologist Shulamis Dion has described first- or second-generation musicians in the United States as being successful only insofar as they were "able to achieve the bimusical fluency [their] generation of musicians and their audiences demanded."[4] This meant an ability to read and transpose charts, to play several instruments, and, most importantly, to play the "English" music, the American dance and theater music, that Jewish listeners requested.

Clarinetist Shloymke Beckerman, who was recorded on a number of sides in 1923-24, was one of the few first-generation Jewish musicians who not only understood the need to be "bimusical," but was able to become fluent in both idioms. As such, he was in a unique position to teach the second-generation how to be successful, and he taught both his son, Sid, and saxophonist Howie Leess. But he

> wasn't just passing on the tunes and the techniques of playing them. The younger generation was also learning the sophistication and the flexibility that would later enable them to diversify. The immigrants, and their musicians along with them, were beginning to lose their rough edges and to enjoy what the *goldene medine* had to offer them.[5]

Unfortunately, that flexibility and diversification meant that they soon came to devalue those "rough edges" – the Yiddish accent that might keep them from successfully making a living in the golden land.

The Holocaust is the second thing that separates the Yiddish experience from that of other immigrant cultures, as it destroyed what had remained of the Yiddish-speaking world in Europe and made it impossible for the immigrants to go home again. That devastation also led fairly directly to the final death blow to Yiddish culture, the formation of the state of Israel and "the increasing importance of Israeli culture in shaping Jewish cultural identity worldwide."[4] American Jews deliberately turned their backs on both the language and the culture of *golus*, their long exile, as they looked to the new Jewish homeland to provide, finally, a safe haven, a land of their own.

By the middle of the 20th century, "both Zionists and assimilationists, those who wanted to assert a new Jewish identity and those who wanted to escape it entirely, would find the memory of Yiddish culture a source of embarrassment."[5] Thus, when ethnomusicologists and musicians inspired by the various "revivals" in other ethnic musics began to search for the Jewish equivalents of African-American or Appalachian old-timers, there were virtually none to be found. Henry Sapoznik, one of the first people to turn his attention to Yiddish music in that generation, describes this experience:

> ...the sort of face-to-face collecting and observation of continuity through which I'd researched old-time music in numerous field trips to North Carolina was not possible for the study of this music. There was no Old Country to go back to, no Poland, Ukraine, or Romania where I might find Jewish old-timers tenaciously holding onto their repertoire against all modern influences.[6]

Michael Alpert, another such researcher/performer, similarly describes the unique situation in which he and his colleagues found themselves:

> This dearth of opportunities for personal contact and study with master musicians performing a vital functional repertoire within a broad-based community context has widened the distance between the present musical generation and those who have preceded them, to an extent virtually unparalleled in other Euro-American musical traditions.[7]

Fortunately, the wave of immigration that brought Yiddish-speakers to America coincided with the development of commercial recording as an industry, and through the benefits of that now outmoded format, we can gain access to generations who never had a chance to transmit their knowledge in person. Between 1898 and 1950, tens of thousands of 78rpm recordings were marketed to the various ethnic groups who had settled in the United States, primarily in the larger cities, and the Jews were no exception. Although record company files are far from complete, Spottswood[8] has reported approximately 6000 Yiddish/Hebrew recordings released

between 1898 and 1942, and Aylward[9] estimated about another 5000 recorded and manufactured in Europe during the same time. Of course, these commercial recordings in no way attempted to document anything the way a field recording might; they were simply aural snapshots of particular performances that some record producer or company executive thought would sell. But enough were made and enough have survived to give us a fairly comprehensive picture of Yiddish music in the early 20th century and even before, as some of the recorded performers were already quite advanced in years when they were immortalized on shellac.

That was the good news. The bad news was that when what is now termed the klezmer revival began in the late 1970s, the availability of recordings to study was severely limited. While many institutional archives owned fairly sizable collections of Yiddish records, there was neither interest in nor money for cataloging them and transferring them to tape so that students of the culture could listen to them without causing further deterioration to the discs themselves. Other archives did have rudimentary catalogs, but restricted access to the recordings to individuals demonstrating some serious academic purpose and either did not permit copying the discs or charged extremely high per-side fees. As a result, interested students needed to find someone with a private collection of discs who was willing to share taped transfers or, more commonly, find someone who knew one of those lucky people with such tapes. If one could get hold of such a tape, the sonic quality was often atrocious because the transfers were often made on home audio equipment and copied over and over again, with each analog copy degenerating significantly from its parent.

Fortunately, the individuals who were most interested in what the recordings had to teach also understood how important they were. As Sapoznik puts it: "These delicate shellacs, these three-minute musical Rosetta Stones in effect were the Old Country, a ticket back to that time and place. Almost immediately I resolved to get these records into circulation."[10]

He was as good as his word; the first of his 10 reissues came out in 1980. It was followed in short order by a reissue compiled by collector Martin Schwartz, 9 reissues by Michael Schlesinger on his Global Village Music label, and three by klezmer clarinetist and scholar Joel Rubin. These reissues have been a vitally important resource for me and the other musicians who have come up through the ranks of the Yiddish cultural revival over the past 30 years.

And yet even the reissues have severe limitations for the serious student of Yiddish culture. For one thing, the selections on any individual reissue are subject to the specific interests and tastes of its compiler, and as I have mentioned, the entire reissued "oeuvre" reflects the interests and tastes of exactly 4 individuals. What we have readily available, even today, consists only of what those four compilers thought interesting or important. The seriousness of this limitation can best be understood by considering some numbers. Of the more than 10,000 individual performances that were presumably issued, the combined total of all tracks available on the 23 commercial reissue CDs that have been released to date is only 435, and approximately 80 of those are items which appear on more than one CD. This means that at best, only about 4% of the potentially available material has been made accessible to interested listeners. Moreover, although cantorial selections and folk/theater songs vastly outnumber instrumental recordings, the latter have attracted the most attention over the past 30 years and

accordingly comprise the vast majority of the reissued material. Of the 435 tracks on these CDs, 19 are cantorial, 1 is a comic monologue, 66 are folk or theater songs, and 349 are instrumental.

In a situation where the available information is already limited, in this instance by the fact that only a small percentage of the cantors, singers and instrumentalists who were actively performing were recorded in the first place, any additional restriction in effect becomes a kind of censorship. If we are allowed to hear only a certain kind of performance, we come to believe that that is the only kind of performance there was, and all other styles and repertoire become lost to us.

Fortunately, 21st-century technology has changed this situation irrevocably for the better.

The story of my collection of Yiddish recordings and the Living Traditions online digital archive begins with a tale of eBay and the Internet, the epitomes of such technology. In the summer of 2004, I was browsing through eBay looking at the results of a search on Yiddish, just to see what was there, when I came across a listing offering 100 Jewish 78s, mostly cantorial, from the collection of a cantor who had recently died. It sounded like they were in good condition but nobody was bidding on them, so I decided to make an offer, figuring that even though I might not want them myself, I could certainly find a good home for them. To my delight, I got the whole collection for something like $40 and was excited to find a few instrumental recordings and an Aaron Lebedeff performance among the liturgical music. A few days later I was describing this find to Henry Sapoznik, who replied by telling me how his friend Dick Spottswood had had no luck trying to sell his collection of Yiddish recordings on the auction site. I asked him to put me in touch with Spottswood, and I was soon the proud owner of his 200+ discs, primarily of klezmer recordings. With this core collection as a beginning, I began to search more diligently on eBay and other on line sites offering 78s at auction or for sale, and in the past 4½ years have amassed over 5000 discs representing over 6000 unique performances, with more material becoming available every day from dealers all over the world who know my collecting interests and often bring items to my attention.

In the pre-Internet universe, collectors would find records at flea markets, antique stores and the like in the areas they visited in person. My efforts have not been limited by any physical constraints; I have bought discs from all over the US and Canada, from Israel and Russia, from Australia, Europe, Venezuela, Argentina and Uruguay, often on the same day. As a result, in addition to American-made recordings, I have quite sizable sub-collections of materials recorded in Israel and in South America, both centers of post-war Yiddish culture, as well as another of Yiddish recordings from the former Soviet Union. I have a fairly high percentage of discs issued on the Jewish-owned Banner label from the 1940s, and over 650 of the 700-800 klezmer recordings that are known to have been issued. I have also made an effort to collect whatever recordings I could find with comic monologues or dialogues, both in Yiddish and "Yinglish," as well as the records of Jewish performers who made recordings in other languages or for other ethnic groups, such as David Medoff's Ukrainian and Russian releases or the songs Isa Kremer recorded in Polish.

While I have a fairly decent sound system for making transfers, the rate of accumulating discs and the amount of time I spend every day to continue to build my collection made making transfers for my own use next to impossible. Again, Henry Sapoznik made a match by putting me in touch with Christopher King, a Grammy-award-winning engineer with the unique ability to restore the sound to the clarity and dynamic range present on the day that it was recorded. In talking to King, I realized that partnering with him afforded me an opportunity to make the recordings accessible in a way I had not even considered. He described what he could offer as follows:

> Most libraries & archives that outsource their preservation & dissemination seek the lowest possible bid because of the quantity of their holdings but they necessarily have to sacrifice the quality of the work. More importantly, there is a false notion that there is such a thing as a "flat transfer," i.e., a perfectly neutral signal transfer from analog to digital. After 1953 most studios used a RIAA (-20K compression) curve when recording a performance so that playback on standard equipment would be uniform. Prior to this period, every studio & session used whatever sound curves (analogue compression rates from -5 to -35 K) accommodated the performers & the conditions of the studio so when an archival service...does "flat transfers" they are playing back every single disc at a standard RIAA curve which greatly flattens the analogue signal & radically reduces the dynamic range, particularly the lower mid-range. Once this is converted to digital, it is pretty impossible to restore the dynamic range & bring out the articulation that artists worked so hard to convey. Archival companies are simply going to grab a stack of records, drop the stylus & record the material, with little to no concern with re-equalizing, noise reduction, or compensating for original compression rates. My approach is completely different in that every session will be equalized and compensated & then the individual side will be approached so as to bring out the dynamics & clarity of the performance while trying to keep non-musical information to a minimum.[12]

To accomplish what he has described, King determines what year and under what circumstances it was recorded and then selects the correct stylus, recording speed, and equalization for that particular recording. Once these variables have been established, he listens to each recording several times to make adjustments uniquely tailored to each performance.

The result are transfers that have an immediacy and intelligibility that permit the listener to follow the middle parts of a choral accompaniment or understand the Yiddish words sung or spoken in many cases over 100 years ago. And once those transfers have been digitized, they can be copied without any loss of quality.

With the problems of availability of material and sound quality dealt with, there only remained the issue of widespread access. When I first entered the world of Yiddish culture, my frustration at how difficult it was to find the things I needed to listen to in order to learn to play with a truly Yiddish accent led me to vow that someday I would do what I could to insure that others had the access they needed. In those early years I went so far as to consult a lawyer about setting up a non-profit with providing access to all extant Yiddish recordings as

its mission, but that seemed like too enormous an undertaking, especially since at that point I had no idea how to gain access to the material myself. Now, however, I was already part of a non-profit with the preservation and dissemination of Yiddish culture as its mission, and I already had the materials at hand. Here was another match made in heaven, and the Living Traditions Online Digital Archive was born.

We are currently in the process of designing a fully searchable database of the recordings in my collection so that users will be able to find recordings based not only on artist or title as it was printed on the label, but also for standardized artists names and titles in YIVO standardized transliteration, as well as being able to search by show, composer or lyricist (for Yiddish theater material), prayer service (for cantorial pieces), genre (for instrumental tunes) or keywords (for Yiddish songs). To date, over 1600 selections have already been transferred, and we are also in the process of exploring how to export data from our database to tag the digital music files with artist, title and release information so that someone downloading a song and listening on an mp3 player will be able to see full identification information scroll by. When the archive goes live, we hope within the coming year, anyone with Internet access and a broadband connection will be able to listen to any of the material that we have available, as often as they want, and at a quality of sound previously unavailable except through some (not all) of the commercial reissues.

In order to complete the project, we plan to contact other collectors and possibly other institutions holding significant collections of Yiddish material, particularly European-made cantorial recordings, to fill in the gaps in my own holdings. Fortunately, I have already begun to make connections with other collectors that I have encountered in my Internet dealings, and the several to whom I have thus far communicated our plans have expressed enthusiasm for taking part.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough how none of these activities, neither my collecting nor the availability of non-destructively replicated transfers nor the ability to disseminate this precious material to students all over the world, would have been possible without the technologies that have been developed over the past 15 years. Combining them with the early 20th-century recording techniques that provide our primary means of connecting with previous generations of Yiddish cultural practitioners, we have a unique opportunity to learn from the treasured elders who were not available to us in person. That is truly a match made in heaven.

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