

CONCERT

Phil Alexander

I have based this programme loosely on my own journey through Jewish music: as a working klezmer musician in London, as a bandleader of a successful world / folk group in Scotland, as a student of Yiddish music in Berlin, and as a researcher of Scottish-Jewish music of the early 20th century. In all of these environments, I have found that Jewish music is rich, diverse, and fiercely resists categorisation!

Doina **Moldavian Yiddish Hora** **Bughici's Sirba (Avrom Bughici)**

This medley begins with a traditional klezmer improvisation, a reflective moment that is often the overture to a more rhythmic piece. Unlike jazz music, a klezmer *doina* makes use of small repeated varying motifs, rather than larger-scale patterns or changing harmonic structures. The simple but beautiful second tune in this set was published in Petru Stoianov's 1972 collection *500 Joc Melodies from Moldavia*. It's one of those magical pieces of music that seems to circle around on itself without ever wanting to end. Finally, a piece from the prolific Avrom Bughici (1883-1968) – a klezmer fiddle player and composer from the Romanian town of Iași. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the Bughici klezmer family was well known in the region, they were highly in demand for wedding and theatre performances, also touring more widely throughout the Balkans and into Istanbul. Bughici's lively *sirba* has been a favourite of klezmer musicians across Europe and the US for the past couple of decades.

Papirosn (Herman Yablokoff)

As a younger musician in London I worked regularly with the amazing Russian-Jewish klezmer clarinetist Gregori Schechter. We played weddings, bar mitzvahs, and concerts every weekend – a fantastic apprenticeship! Also in the band was the wonderful singer Ronnie Goldberg. It was Ronnie who introduced me to the world of Yiddish song, and I have very fond memories of him singing this tune. Written by the Belarusian-born Jewish American actor, singer, composer, poet, and Yiddish Theatre star Herman Yablokoff (1903-1981) for his own play of the same name, *Papirosn* is an unrelenting tale of woe, narrated by a poor cigarette seller living on the streets and trying daily to scrape together enough to survive.

A kalte nakht, a nepldike, fintster umetum,
 Shteyt a yingele fartroyert un kukt zikh arum,
 Fun regn shitst im nor a vant,
 A koshikl halt er in hant
 Un zayne oygn betn yedn shtum:
 — Ikh hob shoyt nit keyn koyekh
 Mer arumtsugeyn in gas,
 Hungerik un opgerisn, fun dem regn nas,
 Ikh shlep arum zikh fun baginen,
 Keyner git nit tsu fardinen—
 Ale lakhn, makhn fun mir shpas.

Refrain:

Kupitye, koyft zhe, koyft zhe papirosn,
 Trukene fun regn nit fargosn,
 Koyft zhe, bilik benemones,
 Koyft un hot oyf mir rakhmones.
 Ratevet fun hunger mikh atsind.
 Kupitye, koyft zhe shvebelek antikn,
 Dermitt vet ir a yoseml derkvikn,
 Umzist mayn shrayen un mayn loyfn,
 Keyner vil bay mir nit koyfn —
 Oysgeyn vel ikh muzn vi a hunt.

Mayn tate in milkhome hot farloyrn zayne hent,
 Mayn mame hot di tsores mer oyshaltn nit gekent.
 Yung in keyver zi getribn,
 Bin ikh oyf der velt farblibn
 Umgliklekh un elnt vi a shteyn.
 Breklekh klayb ikh oyf tsum esn oyf dem altn mark,
 A harte bank iz mayn geleger in dem kaltn park.
 Un dertsu di politsyantn
 Shlogn mikh mit shverdn, kantn,
 S'helft nit mayn betn, mayn geveyn.

Ikh hob gehat a shvesterl, a kind fun der natur,
 Mit mir tsuzamen zikh geshlept hot zi a gantsn yor,
 Mit ir geven iz mir fil gringer,
 Laykhter vern flegt der hinger
 Ven ikh fleg a kuk ton nor oyf ir.
 Mit a mol gevorn iz zi shvakh un zeyer krank,
 Oyf mayne hent geshtorbn iz zi, oyf a gasnbank.
 Un az ikh hob zi farloyrn
 Hob ikh alts ongevoyn,
 Zol der toyt shoyt kumen oykh tsu mir.

A cold night, misty, and darkness all around.
 A boy stands sadly and looks around.
 Only a wall protects him from the rain.
 He holds a little basket in his hand
 And his eyes beg everyone silently.
 I've no more strength
 Left to walk the streets.
 Hungry and ragged, wet from the rain,
 I drag around from dawn.
 No one provides me any earnings,
 Everyone laughs and makes me a butt of jokes.

Refrain:

Buy my cigarettes!
 Dry ones, not wet from the rain.
 Buy real cheap,
 Buy and have pity on me.
 Save me from hunger.
 Buy these wonderful matches
 And you'll delight an orphan.
 Useless are my cries and my running around,
 No one wants to buy from me.
 I must die like a dog.

My father lost his hands in the war.
 My mother could not bear her troubles any longer and
 was driven to her grave at a young age.
 I was left on this earth
 Unhappy and alone like a stone.
 I gather crumbs to eat in the old market.
 A hard bench is my bed in the cold park.
 And there's also the police
 Who beat me with their swords, the edges,
 My pleas or my cries are of no use.

I had a little sister, a beautiful child.
 She dragged around with me a whole year.
 When with her, it was easier for me;
 My hunger would become lighter
 When I looked upon her.
 Suddenly she became weak and very sick,
 Died in my arms on a street bench.
 And when I lost her,
 I lost everything.
 Let death come already for me too.

The MacGoldberg's Jig and Reel (Phil Alexander) **A Hat of Air (Phil Alexander)**

I moved from London to Edinburgh in 2002 and very quickly met an amazing bunch of truly brilliant musicians – many of whom I still play with regularly. In 2003 I formed the world/folk band Moishe's Bagel. We began by playing traditional klezmer music but swiftly started to incorporate more and more original compositions. These are two of mine here. The first tune is an imagined meeting between Scottish and Jewish music – what might happen perhaps if a klezmer band tried to play a Scottish jig and reel. The second piece is dedicated to my late father Monty. It is inspired by a poem by the American writer Billy Collins, and celebrates those who no longer need their daily clothes, but instead wear a lighter covering, a hat of wind and of air.

Oblivion (Astor Piazzolla)

I became fascinated by tango music about 25 years ago, in particular the music of Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992), creator of 'tango nuevo' in the 1960s. Piazzolla grew up on New York's Lower East Side, where Jewish klezmer music could be heard all around. Later in life he explained that the distinctive rhythms of his new tango came directly from the syncopated 3-3-2 hora accompaniment for klezmer *bulgars* and *freylekhs*. This beautiful piece is one of Piazzolla's most celebrated works, and although this is not Jewish music, I include it here because it was through Piazzolla's music that I discovered the world of Yiddish tango...

Tsi Darf Es Azoy Zayn? (Kasriel Broydo)

A cabaret song from the Vilna ghetto, written by musician and writer/director Kasriel Broydo (1907-1945), with a melody adapted from a well-known prewar tango. Despite, or perhaps because of, the horrific conditions, the wartime ghettos of Vilna, Kovno and elsewhere were full of artistic creativity and dark humour. In particular, Yiddish cabarets were a way to reflect and subtly criticise growing dehumanisation and abuse. This particular song was published after the war in Shmerke Kaczerginski's collection of *Songs from the Ghettos and the Camps*. Kaczerginski described the speed and energy with which new music spread in such a restrictive atmosphere: "in the ghetto we saw a marvellous process: individual creations transformed into folklore before our very eyes ... The creator of this folklore was the bloody times themselves." One of the most popular Yiddish song genres before and during the war was tango, which had taken Europe by storm from the late 1920s onwards. Unlike Argentinian tango, the Eastern European version often deals with darker themes, and this song is a wonderful example. It tells of a world where everything seems the same as ever, but a quick look below the surface reveals that for many, life has changed irrevocably.

*Di zelbe gasn un tramvayen,
Numern elf un fir.
Di zelbe yinglekh loyfn, shrayen
"A tsaytung koyft zhe, koyft bay mir."*

The same streets and trolleys,
Numbers eleven and four.
The same kids running, shouting
"Buy a newspaper, buy it from me."

*Der zelber himl, nor nit enlekh
Der mentsh vos unter im.
Es shaynt di zun alts nit farshtendlekh,
Ikh her es fregt in mir a shtim:*

The same sky, but not the same
Is the man underneath.
The sun shines everywhere, not understanding,
I hear a question asked inside:

*Tsi darf es azoy zayn?
Tsi muz es azoy zayn?
Az far eynem is glik bashert
Un far dem tsveyten is alts farvert?
Ver hot ez ayngeshtelt
Azoy zol zayn di velt?*

Does it have be this way?
Must it be this way?
That happiness is destined for one
And for the second everything is forbidden?
Who determined that
The world should be so?

*Far zey di skvern un bulvarn,
Far mir aza kvartal ...
Farvos far zey mayn heym, mayn betl,
Un mayn geleger hart vi shteyn?*

For them the squares and boulevards,
For me a neighbourhood like this...
Why for them my home and my berth,
And my bed as hard as stone?

Görlitzer Park (Dan Kahn)

March of the Jobless (Mordechai Gebirtig)

For my PhD (and subsequent book), I researched the contemporary klezmer and Yiddish music scene in the city of Berlin. I spent a very happy year in the company of some amazing musicians, all of whom were unfailingly generous with their time and profound in their insights. One of the most interesting was the Detroit-born Dan Kahn (b.1978), a Berlin resident since 2005. Never afraid to be direct, uncomfortable, and even confrontational, Kahn's own leftwing politics often feature in his songwriting and also his choice of older material. In his original song 'Görlitzer Park', Kahn ignores the joyful 21st century manifestation of this lively urban space, and instead uses the

park to conjure up a scene of unresolved anxiety, inescapable pasts, and social malaise – the geographical space of Kreuzberg's Görlitzer Park becomes a historical frame for wartime and postwar conflicts and contradictions, specifically German-Jewish ones. The second song is Kahn's own translation of the Krakow Yiddish poet and songwriter Mordechai Gebirtig's (1877-1942) *Arbetslozer Marsh* – sadly just as relevant today as 90 years ago. Kahn is also a master of multilingual adaptation, slipping frequently between English, German, and Yiddish, often in the course of one single verse – these two examples are no exception.

die Ruinen vom Görlitzer Park [the ruins of Görlitzer Park]
 were cold as a stone in the ground
 aber Steine sind eben so stark [but stones are just as strong]
 as the rubble hid under the mound
 & your hair was as red as the glow
 of the fire that fell from the sky
 & the ruins are covered with snow
 just as white as the white of your eye

& the trains of Berlin, they run her and hin [back & forth]
 through tunnels below in the dark
 but the station is gone so I'll wait for you on
 the ruins of Görlitzer Park

in the garden of frozen desire
 on the derelict couch we sat down
 wie die Stadt hier wir brauchten ein Feuer [like this town we needed fire]
 um uns aufzuwecken vom Traum [to wake us from our dream]
 und du mit den blutigen Haaren [and you with your bloody hair]
 ich seh' deine Augen sind zu [I see that your eyes are closed]
 so I'll be the Wilhelmine Baron & you can be the ewiger Jew [... eternal Jew]

& the trains of Berlin ...

from the ivy at Grunewald station
 to the Treptower Soviet blade
 you built your triumphant narration
 out of stones from the Mendelssohn grave
 where the sun is as gold as the names on the ground
 & the walls grow up over the trees
 & the tower antenna is haunting the town
 & the past is a quiet disease

where the air is filled up with sparrows
 when once it was clouded with crows
 & the Sleepwalker shot his last arrow
 then he buried himself with his bow
 oh my lover, my murderer's daughter
 accomplice to all of my sins
 our city of love & of slaughter
 wird immer noch heißen Berlin ... [will always be called Berlin]

eyns, tsvey, dray, fir, arbetsloze zenen mir
nisht gehert khodoshem lang in fabrik dem hamerklang
s'lign keylem kalt fargesn
s'nemt der zhaver zey shoyen fresn
geyen mir arum in gas
vi di gvirim pust un pas

eyns, tzvey, dray, fir, arbetsloze zenen mir,
on a beged on a heym,
undzer bet iz erd un leym,
hot nor ver vos tsu genisn,

one, two, three, four, join the Marching Jobless Corps
 no work in the factory, no more manufacturing
 all the tools are broke & rusted
 every wheel & window busted
 through the city streets we go
 idle as a CEO, idle as a CEO

1,2,3,4 ...
 we don't have to pay no rent
 sleeping in a camping tent
 dumpster diving don't take money

taylt men zikh mit yedn bisn,
vaser vi d'gvirim vayn
gish mir in zikh arayn.

eyns, tsvey, dray, fir, ot azoy marshirn mir
arbetsloze trit nokh trit, un mir zingen zikh a lid
far a land, a velt, a naye
vu es lebn mentshn fraye
arbetsloz iz keyn shum hand
in dem nayem frayn land

every bite we share with twenty
let the yuppies have their wine
bread & water suit us fine

one, two, three, four, pick yourselves up off the floor
unemployment marches on, so we'll sing a marching song
for a land, a world of justice
where no cop or boss can bust us
there'll be work for every hand
in a new & better land

Excerpts from The Hope of Israel (Isaac Hirshow)

Isaac Hirshow (1883-1955) was born in a shtetl to the northwest of Vitebsk. He worked as a cantor in Warsaw and Lodz, before moving to Scotland in the early 1920s. In Glasgow, he became chief cantor of the city's beautiful Garnethill synagogue, but he also found time to study at Glasgow University, where he became the University's first ever music graduate (he even got to choose the colour of his graduation hood!). As part of his Music degree, Hirshow submitted an extended cantata for choir, soloists and full orchestra, based partly on the *min hameitsar* text of Psalm 118 – a journey from darkness to light that is very much echoed in Hirshow's music. Although it's a stunning piece of work, the composition is hardly known outside of the Glasgow Jewish community – where current cantor Eddie Binnie keeps these beautiful melodies alive in his services. Here are two excerpts from Hirshow's magnificent cantata, in a much reduced and slightly more improvisatory version.

Romance (Ernest Levy)

Ernest Levy (1925-2009) was born in Bratislava. He survived seven concentration camps and after the war settled eventually in Glasgow as cantor of Giffnock synagogue, where he became a central and much-loved figure within the city community. The author of two books, Levy was a tireless advocator for social change and human responsibility, repeatedly sharing his own horrific experiences in a quest for greater understanding. According to his daughter Judy, this beautiful and simple Romance was likely written in Budapest, very possibly for an unknown and now long-lost love.

Dobranotsh

Hannah's Skotshne

Shalakho (trad Armenian-Jewish)

Another klezmer medley to bookend the concert. The first two tunes come from a remarkable archive held in the Vernadsky Library in Kyiv, Ukraine. Holding valuable materials collected in expeditions led by the folklorist S. Ansky and musicologist Zisman Kiselgof, this archive lay gathering dust through the years of Stalinism – until in 2018 an intrepid group of scholars and musicians persuaded the library to allow them access. The resulting treasure trove of digital photographs is now freely available online (www.klezmerinstitute.org/kmdmp/), and for the past seven years an international community of Yiddish musicians, linguists, and historians has been creating useable scores of this wonderful music. A *dobranotsh* is a goodnight tune for newlyweds – this one comes from the repertoire of fiddle player Motl Reyder, who was born in the town of Dubno in the middle of the 19th century. The second tune was the least well-preserved manuscript in the whole collection, and was rendered playable by the musician Hannah Ochner (hence the title). Finally, we have a piece of Armenian Jewish wedding repertoire that I have been playing for years and never get tired of!

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