

AMS Boston – 31 Oct 2019

MUSIC AND HASIDISM IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

Sponsored by the Jewish Studies and Music Study Group
Jeffrey A. Summit (Tufts University), Chair, Respondent

As early as the 1830s Orthodox Jewish leaders denounced the United States as a land inhospitable to Judaism. But in the aftermath of the Holocaust the Hasidic community in America began to thrive to an extent that could never have been predicted. As a community, Hasidim have accumulated wealth and represent an important voting bloc. The community has also seen drastic changes in lifestyle due to the influence and increasing use of media such as radio, television, and the Internet; and due to exposure to the world beyond the eruv. This panel takes as a fulcrum the mid-twentieth century to discuss how social, technological, and economic opportunities have affected musical practices.

GIVING NEW LIFE TO THE NIGUN: BEN ZION SHENKER IN HIS AMERICAN CONTEXT
Gordon Dale (Hebrew Union College)

As stakeholders in the Haredi community debate the boundaries of “kosher music,” the composer Ben Zion Shenker (1925–2016) is frequently depicted in the discourse as the pinnacle of musical authenticity and respectability. This paper unravels how Shenker came to be an emblem of Hasidic cultural continuity and ideal practice, despite his American nationality and his participation in musical activities that ran so contrary to communal norms that they required rabbinic dispensation. Drawing from personal interviews conducted with Shenker, I examine the ways that he benefited from the opportunities that his American context offered, and, following Erich Nunn’s work on “sounding the color line,” I contextualize Shenker’s place in Haredi race-based discourses of musical propriety. I argue that Shenker’s urban American context positioned him to be an important culture-bearer of the Hasidic nigun canon, particularly that of the Moditz dynasty, precisely at the moment that the Hasidic community found new urgency in establishing a home outside of Europe after the Holocaust. At this critical time, facets of American life such as religious freedom, immigration laws, foreign policy, opportunities for upward mobility, and access to recording technology created an environment in which Shenker could study, preserve, and give new life to the nigun genre.

THE SONGS OF YOM TOV EHRLICH: HASIDIC ENCOUNTERS WITH POSTWAR AMERICAN CULTURE
Tzipora Weinberg (New York University)

Yom Tov Ehrlich (1914–1990) was a Hasidic musician whose output was markedly popular in Orthodox Jewish circles at the time of its release, between 1959 and 1985. He commercially recorded 317 songs on thirty-six cassettes, all of which bear original lyrics in Yiddish, and many of which are prefaced by spoken-word poetry in the style of badkholes. Ehrlich’s influence is still apparent today in the numerous cover versions of his songs, released by many contemporary Hasidic recording artists. This paper analyzes Ehrlich’s musical contribution with focus on his views on America. Like most others in the Hasidic community, Ehrlich was an immigrant himself, entering the United States in 1949. A small body of his work is devoted to his new homeland, which he conceived not only as an immigrant but also as a Hasid with a distinct world view. Two of Ehrlich’s works, “Ay Ay Ameritshke” and “Williamsburg” serve as case studies. They provide vivid detail of

the lived experience of Orthodox Jews in New York in the late 1950s through the early 1960s and the responses to it. The two songs represent entirely different circumstances encountered by new Jewish immigrants, unveiling both the positive and negative aspects of American life as perceived by Ehrlich. Through iconographic research, hermeneutics, and musical analysis, this paper sheds light upon Ehrlich's unique views and their musical expression, which negotiate proximity and distance to American life at large.

FACING CULTURAL MOBILITY AT THE DAWN OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM:
SKVERER HASIDISM AND THE MUSIC OF LIPA SCHMELTZER
Tina Frühauf (RILM/Columbia University)

Skverer Hasids came to the United States as early as 1923, when Rebbe Yitzchak Twersky left Bessarabia and settled in Borough Park, Brooklyn, where he opened a synagogue. However, the Skverer did not establish a strong foothold on American soil until 1948, when, like other Hasidic dynastic leaders, Rebbe Yakov Yosef (1899–1968) sought to continue the movement in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Disappointed with American materialism and “decadence,” he created a rural community far from the hustle and bustle of New York life. In 1954 he founded the insular enclave of New Square in Rockland County, New York. Customs of the Skvrer are similar to other Hasidic groups, including cultural and musical practices such as the art of badkhones and the corpus of songs for weddings and other festivities. With new performers emerging on the Orthodox circuit in the later twentieth century—among them Avraham Fried and Mordechai Ben David, also known as MBD, and foreshadowed by Yom Tov Ehrlich—repertoires began to slowly change, adopting features found in mainstream popular music. But it was not until the arrival of Lazar Schmelczer (b.1978), better known as Lipa Schmeltzer, on the scene, that they experienced a new and noticeable shift. Relying on various methodologies, including oral history, musical analysis, iconographic research, and textual interpretation as well as Stephen Greenblatt theory of cultural mobility, this paper focuses on precisely this shift. It does so by analyzing two of Lipa's songs: “Gelt,” written by Hasidic composer Yossi Green and first released in 2003 on Lipa's third album B'derech, and “Abi m'leibt,” a parody of The Tokens' hit “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” premiered by Lipa in 2005. These songs preceded Lipa's radical departure from what some have termed “kosher music” (with specific rules put forward by Rabbi Ephraim Luft of Bnei Brak) and as such give insight into a pivotal moment in the cultural mobility of Hasidism at the dawn of the twenty-first century.