

Remembering and Rebuilding: Folkways Cantorials 1947-1965

by Judah M. Cohen

Aficionados of Jewish liturgical music today describe the years between the late nineteenth century and 1950 as the “Golden Age of the Cantorate.” The term speaks to a time when men steeped in the religious Jewish traditions of Eastern Europe thrilled congregations and audiences with their concert-quality renditions of prayers. These cantors, or *hazanim*, gained reputations as recipients of a thousand-plus-year Jewish musical legacy. They also became symbols of the circa 2.3 million Eastern European Jews who reshaped the American Jewish culture and demographics between 1880 and 1924.

Star figures, such as Yossele Rosenblatt, Joseph Shlisky, and Gershon Sirota, gained worldwide appeal, inspiring comparisons to opera singers, such as [Enrico Caruso](#). An emerging commercial recording industry, interested in catering to ethnic audiences, recorded and distributed their work across the globe. The resulting landscape of heavily attended (and sometimes surreptitiously recorded) services, international tours, and strong-selling records put cantors at the middle of an era: men of God and the stage, balancing old world and new, regulating prayer aesthetics while making it a high art. The 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, itself an adaptation of a popular stage show, brought this anxiety into mainstream America: viewers watched as young Jackie Rabinowitz/Jack Robin had to choose between a lucrative performing career and his ancestral responsibilities to synagogue song, both of which were rendered with the latest sound synchronization technology.

Well-known cantors in the second tier of stardom figured prominently in Folkways Records founder Moses Asch's first recordings, created in the early 1940s as Jewish music transitioned from mainstream record companies to Jewish specialty labels such as Tikva Records. Few of these cantors' recordings, however, actually constituted synagogue music. Asch's first real “cantorials” album instead came in 1947, from circa 25-year-old New York native Aaron/Arele Diamond and prominent Yiddish music composer Sholem Secunda. By this time, the “Golden Age” had ended: Jewish Eastern Europe, devastated by the Nazi period, could no longer serve as a source for Jewish cultural life and creativity. The sounds that had served as a reminder of the “old country,” consequently, turned into a preservation and heritage project.

In 1948, the same year that the United Nations established the State of Israel, the liberal Reform Jewish movement in America established a cantorial school in New York City; two other schools quickly followed, connected to the Conservative (1952) and Modern Orthodox movements (1954) respectively. Each institution used a multi-year curriculum to implant the Eastern European cantorial art (*hazanut*) into successive classes of interested students. As cantors graduated from these programs starting in the early 1950s, they formed professional organizations dedicated to the internal regulation and quality of the profession.

By the time Danny Thomas appeared as the new *Jazz Singer* in Warner Brothers' 1953 remake of the film, Folkways had begun its own response to the tragedy. Between 1951 and 1963, alongside several albums dedicated to Yiddish, Hebrew, and Israeli song, the label released six albums of cantorials featuring the voices of three Eastern European-born cantors. Vilna (Vilnius)-born [David Kusevitsky](#), the best known of these cantors, was one of four celebrated cantorial brothers who presided in American pulpits. [Abraham Brun](#), born in Lodz, Poland, led prayers at a Long Beach, New York synagogue. Russian-born [Joseph Kanefsky](#) served a Jewish congregation in the Bronx, according to 1940 census records. The albums' liner notes presented these cantors as vessels of tradition and ambassadors of a now-lost world. Brun, according to album liner notes, persevered through the Auschwitz, Mauthausen, and Ebensee concentration camps before coming to New York via Palestine. Kusevitsky and Kanefsky left Europe before the Nazis took over thanks to generous offers from American synagogues. The albums played up their status as authorities of the music while portraying the music itself as authorless, implying their art as emerging from the soul of a decimated population.

But these selections typically *did* have composers. And five of the six albums adhered to the cantorial recording standards of the day by including professional instrumental accompaniment—unlikely in “traditional” *in situ* settings that forbade instrumental usage on most religious holidays. (Unaccompanied albums such as Kanefsky's [Friday Night Service](#) were by far the exception.) Their recordings evidence classical vocal training with an emphasis on linguistic clarity and the high registers, melismatic runs (that is, rapid successions of tones), and ethnic sound that characterized “Jewish” devotion. Alongside other cantors who participated in this recording “survival,” the Folkways cantors brought with them a storehouse of knowledge: familiar “traditional” melodies, intimate knowledge of the Jewish liturgical year, understanding of the give-and-take between the cantor's own musical exegesis and congregational involvement, and a palette of musical tools that could color any given moment of the service with appropriate sentiment.

Among the most complex and interesting of these musical tools is an understanding of the “synagogue modes.” While different scholars have different ideas about how this combination of scales and melodic phrases emerged in European Jewish life, by the 1880s cantors with knowledge of Western music theory had consolidated them into a system that focused on three primary modes, roughly identified as major-like, minor-like, and “exotic”-sounding. Negotiated skillfully, the modes became a way for cantors to show their erudition, matching Judaism's history and culture to a sound that could stand alongside Western art music. By the late 1950s, cantors could also consult a published manual for ideas about how to harmonize these modes for choral and instrumental accompaniment.

Prayers of exaltation such as Kusevitsky's “[Zar'o Chayo Vekayomo](#)” (Offspring that Live and Exist) used the “Adonai Malach” (God Ruled) mode.¹ Cantors often set texts calling for devotional intensity in the “Ahava Rabbah” (Great Love) mode, with its augmented, ethnic-sounding leaps; Kanefsky's “[Av Harachamim](#)” (Father of Mercy) provides one of many illustrations. David Kusevitsky's “[Ashrei](#),” with its minor-sounding solemnity, presents an example of the “Magein Avot” (Shield of Our Fathers) mode—as does Kanefsky with a rendering of the original “[Magein Avot](#)” text on his [Friday Night Service](#) album. A sign of

Jewish identity, these synagogue modes became a central aspect of cantorial pedagogy, seen as separating lay-leaders from those deeply invested in the tradition.

Cantors also became conversant in iconic melodies of the liturgical year. “[Kol Nidrei](#)” (a.k.a. Kol Nidre, All Our Vows), an Aramaic language prayer sung at the start of Yom Kippur, was often considered the most significant of these melodies. A climax of the Jewish year as well as all three English language *Jazz Singer* films (including the 1980 remake with Neil Diamond), it became a yardstick by which a congregation could judge a cantor's skill. Its inclusion as the first selection of Brun's album [Cantorials for the High Holidays](#) thus comes as no surprise.

In other situations, familiar melodies that were incorporated into other prayers offered a taste of the season to come. Brun's “[Yechadsheyhu](#)” (Renew Us)—a prayer typically sung to usher in a new Hebrew month, begins with an organ introduction by Abraham Ellstein that interpolates the Hanukkah hymn “Ma'oz Tsur” (a.k.a. Ma'oz Tzur, Rock of Ages), thus suggesting that Asch made the recording around the Hebrew month of Kislev (Hanukkah begins on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev). Cantorial singing (*hazanut*) in this way becomes a form of communication between cantor and congregant, creating dynamic and meaningful religious ritual.

Seen from today, the Folkways albums chronicle the efforts of a postwar American population to carry out the responsibilities thrust upon it after the destruction of European Jewry. And their efforts bore fruit. Cantorial culture now thrives in liberal Jewish movements and in significant parts of the Orthodox Jewish population: centered in America, but with a strong presence in Israel and a recent re-rooting in central Europe. New layers of sound have joined those of the cantorial Golden Age: women and men now train alongside each other in liberal Jewish cantorial schools. Cantors still learn the musical traditions attributed to Eastern Europe, and they continue to value classical voice training. But they also work with the Jewish liturgical compositions of contemporary composers and prayer music that originated in postwar youth movements. Some see these practices as a worrying trend in Jewish music: that the musical soul of a people, preserved for nearly two thousand years in the vessel of the cantor, has since given way to popular music of lower quality. Yet these recordings show the cantor differently, as a figure who brought together pop stardom with Jewish identity and used music to connect worshipers with a sense of belonging, both social and divine. And in this way, the legacy continues.

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Further reading:

Cohen, Judah M. 2009. *The Making of a Reform Jewish Cantor: Musical Authority, Cultural Investment*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Shandler, Jeffrey. 2009. "Cantors on Trial," in *Jews, God and Videotape: Religion and Media in America*. New York: New York University Press.

Slobin, Mark. 1989. *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.