

Musikfachscheule in der Region war. Zuvor schon hatte der Jettenbacher Pfarrer August Schowalter bei den zuständigen Behörden eine Musikgewerbeschule angeregt, wogegen allerdings auch polemisiert wurde: In (anonymen) Presseartikeln schmähte ein gewisser August Leppla die Pfälzer Wandermusikanten als »wahre Landplage« und »Fleck im Kleid des pfälzischen Erwerbslebens«. Sie missbrauchen die Gewerbefreiheit zum Bettel (»Faulenzerei, Arbeitsscheu und Ehrlosigkeit« seien die Folge) und böten bestenfalls »Jahrmusik niederster Sorte«; zu fördern gebe es hier nichts.³³ In öffentlichen Gegendarstellungen wurde dies von den Betroffenen empört und selbstbewusst zurückgewiesen.³⁴

Der Erste Weltkrieg bedeutete für das Wandermusikertum eine tiefe Zäsur, danach gingen nur wenige Westpfälzer noch diesem Gewerbe nach (die meisten der vordem bereisten Länder waren Deutschen verschlossen). Eine gewisse Zeit noch konnten Marktnischen besetzt werden (so kamen bis in die 1950er Jahre viele Zirkusmusiker aus Mackenbach). Nach einer Phase relativer Gleichgültigkeit gegenüber der Geschichte der heimischen Wandermusiker wird die Erinnerung an sie in der Westpfalz heute intensiv gepflegt.

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Ethnic, Political and National Identity as Expressed in the Singing of World Music by the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, 1939–1959

The Toronto Jewish Folk Choir sang an unusually wide range of repertoire between 1939 and 1959, their most active and successful years during which they were led by a Viennese-born conductor named Emil Gartner. Although folksongs were the mainstay of their repertoire, as their name would suggest, they also sang a variety of classical and contemporary works. Moreover, the folk repertoire they performed included a huge diversity of traditions: in addition to Yiddish and Hebrew folk and traditional songs, they sang music of the African-Americans, Australian aboriginals, Maritime and French-Canadians, Chinese, English, French, Indonesians, Italians, Romanians, Russians, Scottish, Spanish and Ukrainians. The diversity of their programming at a time when it was not common to mix high-brow and low-brow works nor to sing the traditional music of other peoples is interesting enough, but what makes the history of the folk choir even more interesting is that their

33 Vgl. dazu ausführlich Paul Engel, »Die Affaire Leppla – Ein Beitrag zur Rezeptionsgeschichte des Pfälzer Wandermusikantentums«, in: *Westricher Heimatblätter* 28 (1997), S. 148–162, hier: S. 148.

34 Vgl. ebd., S. 149f.

repertoire was constantly related, in a very conscious and deliberate way, to their identity and mission as a choir. Thankfully, many of the choir's concert programmes from this period are extant, and they include a rich body of texts, in Yiddish and English, in which the choir makes these connections between their music and identity explicit. For this reason their history is a uniquely rich source for understanding the dynamics of identity and music as they work out in musical subcultures.

In order to understand this relationship between repertoire and identity, it may be helpful to provide a brief historical background for the choir.¹ The Toronto Jewish Folk Choir began as the »Freiheit Gezangs Farein« or Freedom Singing Society in 1925, made up of young working-class Jewish immigrants to Toronto who were part of the growing Jewish labour movement of the period. They were associated with a left-wing Jewish fraternal organization called the Labour League, which was made up of young, activist and radical Jewish workers. It was fervently secular, communist-oriented, and pro-Soviet, although they had no official ties to the Communist Party. The choir was only one of the Labour League's cultural programmes, which also included child and adult mandolin orchestras, a drama group, sports teams, English classes and lectures on socialist topics. In 1945 the Labour League joined a number of similar organizations around Canada to form a national organization known as the United Jewish Peoples Order (UJPO), which continues to support the choir to this day.

The choir's early history can be divided into two main periods. During their beginning years, from 1925 to 1939, the choir's politics were more radical and their repertoire consisted exclusively of Yiddish folksongs and Yiddish cantatas dealing with working-class issues. They described themselves during the 1920s and 1930s as part of the world-wide revolutionary movement and sought, in the words of a Yiddish banner they used in their concerts to »build the proletarian cultural front«². During the Gartner years (1939–1959), their politics and repertoire broadened considerably. In response to the changing political climate brought on by World War II, the choir also began to address issues in their repertoire such as human rights, freedom, peace and the fight against fascism. As I have mentioned, they also began to perform a much wider variety of styles under Gartner, including western classical works, contemporary concert works and folksongs from around the world, in addition to the Yiddish repertoire that had been their stock in trade before 1939. Each of the genres of music and each specific work performed by the choir was understood to relate to their worldview. As the choir president described it, »each concert had a special meaning«³. However, in the interest of brevity, this paper is limited to an investigation of the significance and use of folk music in the choir's activities during the Gartner period.

First and foremost, folk music was connected to the choir's working-class roots and understood as an important component in developing what they termed a culture »rooted

1 For a more detailed discussion of the history of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, see the author's doctoral dissertation, »*We Shall Go Forward with our Songs into the Fight for Better Life*«: *Identity and Musical Meaning in the History of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, 1925–1959*, PhD Diss. University of Toronto 2005.

2 Library and Archives Canada, MUS 43 (hereafter LAC 43), Photo collection.

3 See Dr. J. S. Chaikoff, »Past and Future of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir«, 3 June 1950, in: NCL, MUS 43, Box 2.

in the people«. Both the working-class roots of the choir and its continuing objective to fostering a »people's« culture in Canada are consistently mentioned and celebrated in the choir's concert programmes during this period. When the choir celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1950, for example, long-time member Murray Tate wrote about the choir: »The purpose which brought [the choir] together a quarter century ago remains the purpose of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir today – to express the true culture that is inherent in the people.«⁴

Programme texts even suggest that the phrase »folk choir«, in the choir's English name (adopted at the beginning of the war) was meant not only to describe the genre they primarily performed (folk music), but also to describe the choir's connection to the »folk masses«. This second understanding of the phrase »folk choir«, to mean »choir of the people«, although possible in English usage, is not common, and likely reflects the choir's understanding of the Yiddish word *folk* or *folks*, which is commonly used in this latter sense. Chorister Samuel Speisman, for example, asserts in one concert programme that »Our choir exists and grows ever stronger and more beloved by the Jewish masses. This is because our choir is a true Jewish Folk Choir and is supported by the Jewish workers and the Jewish people here in the city.«⁵ One friend of the choir went so far as to argue that the choir had to earn the title »folk« by being rooted in the community. In discussing the choir's history, he argues: »The greater in number and the more critical the social functions that were carried out, the more the choir became nearer to the people until it earned the title »folk choir.«⁶ As these texts make clear, the label »folk« was both highly valued and understood to express the choir's ties to the masses.

Given the great importance placed by choir members on expressing the culture of the working classes, it is not surprising that folk music continued to be the mainstay of the choir's repertoire even as they began to expand into different genres in the post-war period. What is perhaps more surprising is that they chose to sing not only the Yiddish folksongs that they had sung in pre-war years, but also the songs of many other lands and people. This practice is explained by the choir in programme texts as a demonstration of what they termed »the brotherhood of mankind« or the »kinship of humanity« and reflects their growing interest in issues of human equality after the Holocaust.⁷ One 1947 programme essay describes the choir's task as »bringing the spirit of the brotherhood of man through the language of music to all races, creeds, and nationalities«, and a brochure for the choir from 1951 boasts that their organization is »dedicated to the realization of the brotherhood of man«⁸. The choir believed that singing the songs of other people was

4 Murray Tate, »Twenty-Five Years of Cultural Growth«, 3 June 1950, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2.

5 Samuel Speisman, »*Bagrisungen*« (Greetings), 21 May 1943, transl. by Gloria Brumer, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43. Emphasis mine.

6 Joshua Gershman, »*A Virkzamer Kultur-Faktor Oyf Der Ydischer Gas*« (An Important Cultural Factor on the Jewish Street), 24 February 1945, transl. by Gloria Brumer, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/1. Emphasis mine.

7 See Max Burstyn, »A Year's Achievement«, 25 March 1947 in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2; and Brochure, 15 December 1951, in: LAC, 43/3.

an important step in learning to understand and sympathize with those people and to realize commonalities between various ethnicities, cultures and beliefs. Gartner claims in a programme essay that this approach is, in fact, the only path to »true interpretation«:

The ability to sing convincingly [...] the songs of other nations, is the wonderful reward for understanding the life of others, in all its aspects. This is an extremely difficult task, yet the only way to true interpretation. By opening our minds and hearts, we can feel the pulse of another people; it usually proves to be closer to ours than we anticipated, thanks to the continuous flux of interchange and thanks above all, to the kinship of humanity.⁹

The choir's attention to the life and circumstances of the people whose songs they sang reflected their desire to foster art which was embedded in the everyday circumstances of the masses worldwide. They quoted and endorsed Musorgsky's claim that the artist's mission is: »To show life, wherever it is, Truth, however bitter«¹⁰ and they rejected art which was abstract, decadent or written »for its own sake.« Gartner relates this mission to singing the music of other people in one programme essay, where he again argues that an artist must first understand the context of a work before he or she can communicate its truth:

To sing the song of a people one must know this people. To sing of love one must have known and experienced love. To sing of work is to have worked oneself; to sing of suffering is to know suffering and to know it well. Thus music is the artistic truth of life itself, in all its overflowing colors and richness. To communicate this truth to the audience is the artist's supreme reward.¹¹

Many of the folksongs sung by the choir reflect this desire for artistic truth in their depiction of everyday life and common subject matters. Yiddish folk song examples include *Hecher, Besser* (Louder, Better), a wedding song, the humoresque *Vi Der Kaiser Lebt* (How the Czar lives) about a poor Jew's conception of how the Czar lives, *Dos Pastuchl* (The shepherd), about a shepherd who has lost his sheep, and *Yoshke fort avek* (Yoshke is leaving), a sad love song. Non-Yiddish examples are widely varied and include for example the Russian love song *Kalinka*, an Australian Aboriginal lullaby, Maritime-Canadian folksongs about fishing and the sea, a French-Canadian song *Youpe! Youpe!* about an unsuccessful suitor, and *Las Agachadas*, a traditional Spanish dance song.

In their effort to understand the life and work of others and to perform art embedded in the struggles of the masses, the choir placed a special emphasis on songs relating to the fight against oppression. They argued that as Jews they had a special ability to understand the suffering of other people, and even suggest that singing the songs of others who are suffering was a way for the choir to express their own suffering as Jews. The choir president explains this idea in the following excerpt:

8 Ibid.

9 Emil Gartner, »Our Life, Our Art!«, 25 March 1947, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2.

10 4/6 December 1948, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2.

11 Emil Gartner, »Greetings«, 3 June 1950, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2.

We feel keenly the bonds of friendship and comradeship that bind us to the rest of suffering humanity. When we sing of Lidice, we think of the Warsaw Ghetto, when we sing the Negro songs and spirituals, we think of our own people who died in the concentration camps of Europe. When we sing the Palestinian songs, we think of the battles of the Spanish Loyalists. When we sing the Yellow River Cantata we feel for and sympathize with the vast masses of the Chinese people who [...] are battling [...] for freedom and true democracy. [...] And with our song we send our greetings and inspiration not only to our own fighters for freedom but to those of the entire world.¹²

This empathy for suffering humanity can be seen in the choir's preference for songs about the struggle against oppression. Many of these are activist or even militaristic in tone, which reflect the choir's activist spirit and their belief that music could be used as form of political protest. Within their Yiddish repertoire examples include *Nein Nein!* (No, no!), which declares »No! No! Our people shall not perish!« or the Battle Song of the Vilna Ghetto *Zog Nit Keinmol* (Never say), whose inspiring words declare »Never say that you have reached the very end,/Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend;/the hour for which we've yearned will yet arrive,/And our marching step will thunder: We survive!« The Polish ghetto song in Hebrew, *Ani Maamin* (We believe), has a similarly fervent text, which the choir translated as »Our faith is firm as iron, strong as steel; no oppressor can rob us of it«. Similar types of texts were chosen for repertoire of other people groups as well, such as the American labour protest song *Joe Hill* about a martyr for the trade union movement, as well as the well-known Russian folksong *Burlatskaya* (Song of the boatmen), which highlights the struggles of the Russian working class, and protest songs like the Spanish Loyalist song *Rumbala* which includes the battle cry »We fight the fascists, we must destroy them!«

The choir also performed a large collection of African-American spirituals which called for justice and freedom. The most militant of these was the spiritual *Sisters and Brothers*, which declares »Let the blood of Negroes not be spilled anymore!«, but others included the »Sometimes I feel like a motherless« child lament and the freedom-seeking spiritual »Go down Moses« which includes the text »let my people go!« The high number of spirituals performed by the choir reflects their feelings of solidarity towards Blacks in the United States, whom they believed to be oppressed in similar ways to the Jewish Diaspora. In fact, during the late 1940s the choir collaborated frequently with world-famous Black activist and singer Paul Robeson. Robeson performed with the choir in Toronto concerts between 1946 and 1949.¹³

The practice of singing songs from around the world was also related in programme texts to the choir's increased sense of Canadian identity in the war and post-war years. During this period they used primarily English in their concert programmes instead of

12 Dr. J. S. Chaikoff, »The Choir's Message« (undated), in: Clipping. LAC 43/1.

13 After 1949 Robeson's passport was taken away as a result of anti-communist blacklisting in the United States, so he could no longer travel to Canada to perform with the choir.

Yiddish, and began their concerts with the British anthem »God save the Queen« rather than the left-wing anthem *Internationale* which they had previously used. They also frequently described themselves in concert programmes as Canadian, and especially as a »Canadian cultural institution«. The choir also argued that their type of programming, which included songs of many lands, was »truly Canadian cultural entertainment«, because it reflected the diversity in Canada's population. Instead of believing that English or French cultures were more authentically Canadian than other cultures, they argued that »every ethnic group can and should participate in the crystallization of a distinct Canadian culture«¹⁴.

This multicultural framework for Canadian culture allowed the choir to express both their Jewish and Canadian identities simultaneously, since their Jewish culture could be understood as an important and valid piece in the mosaic of Canadian cultures. In an extensive article on music and culture from a 1947 concert programme, Gartner argues that the best way for a Jew to enhance Canadian culture is to be Jewish. He writes:

No, we Jews need not fear being lesser Canadians by being better Jews; on the contrary, we shall be better Canadians by being conscious Jews. To those who doubt, let it be said that the coming of a culture, distinctly Canadian, will be moulded out of the cultural contributions of most, if not all peoples who, in their entirety are called: The Canadian People. There is nothing in our Jewish heritage that is contrary to a Canadian way of living. On the other hand, we may contribute to Canadian culture something priceless and absolutely irreplaceable.¹⁵

Although the choir's identity clearly had political and Canadian components, this by no means detracted from their Jewish identity or their pride in a Jewish musical heritage. This fact is supported by their continued inclusion of Jewish folk repertoire in their concerts – by far the most frequently performed type of folksong, and assertions in programme texts about their pride in singing »the songs of our people«, as well as »acquainting the music-loving public with the rich treasure-house of Jewish and Israeli folksongs«¹⁶. What is more interesting is how the expression of that Jewish identity in repertoire changed during the war and postwar years. In the choir's more radical early history, they were fervently secular and included only secular songs in Yiddish. But during the war the choir's programme texts begin to speak of the importance of unity among Jews in struggling against their common enemy. The choir president, for example, wrote in 1943 that »the most important requirement for victory is unity, unity among the allied nations and between every nation [...] and even more, unity needs to be strengthened among Jews«¹⁷. After this point one can observe a broader array of Jewish repertoire and a more relaxed attitude to songs in Hebrew and songs with liturgical texts. Hebrew folksongs from the Middle East became

14 »Greetings«, 14 May 1955, in: Executive Board. Concert Programme. LAC 43/3. Emphasis mine.

15 Emil Gartner, »Our Life, Our Art!«, 25 March 1947, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2.

16 See note 14.

17 Dr. Chaikoff, »A Bagrisung tsum Khorí« (A greeting to the choir), 21 May 1943, transl. by Gloria Brumer, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2.

particularly common repertoire choices in the late 1940s, in support of the new state of Israel. In 1949, for example, they dedicated one half of a concert to Israeli songs, calling it a »musical salute to Israel«¹⁸.

Finally, despite these various additions in types of folk repertoire during the Gartner years, the choir did not abandon the repertoire of their early period, nor disregard the plight of the working class. They continued to include songs that dealt with issues such as labour hardships and socio-economic injustice. Many were settings of socialist Yiddish poems, such as the song *Un Du Akerst* (And you plow), with words by German poet Georg Herwegh translated into Yiddish by Chaim Zhitlowsky, which declares, »And you plow and plant the seed,/And you clad the world you feed,/And you hammer, spin the yarn,/But what, my people, do you earn?« or *Vacht Oif* (Wake Up) by Soviet-Yiddish poet David Edelshtat, which asks, »How long, oh, how long will you slaves yet remain and bear the shameful chain?«, as well as Morris Rosenfeld's *Main Rue Platz* (My resting place) in which the poet reflects bitterly on the wasted lives of those who work on the machines: »Don't look for me where myrtles are green/You will not find me there, my beloved/Where lives wither at the machines/There is my resting place.«¹⁹ Labour and protest songs of unknown literary origin were also performed, such as *Ot Ozoj Neyt a Shnayer* (Thus sews a tailor) which laments »Thus he toils throughout the week/But for all his toil/His earnings are meager.« Even the Lullaby which the choir sang regularly, *Viglid* (Cradle song), addresses issues of class and injustice, with the words »Sleep my child, sleep. As you grow older, as the years go by, you will come to know the difference between the rich and the poor.«

As we have seen, the Folk Choir sang a great variety of folk repertoire to express a cultural identity which was complex and had overlapping aspects. Both folk music as a genre and specific folksongs were understood as relating, in different ways, to their identity as political progressives, as Jews, and as Canadians. Thus in a unique way, they were able to use folk repertoire to express very specific political, ethnic and national identities while singing the songs of a huge variety of lands and peoples. This understanding of the repertoire they sang and its relationship to the choir's identity is a wonderful demonstration of the malleability of musical meaning, since this one body of repertoire was understood to have so many different connotations and uses. Through musical discourse in programme texts and in performance the choir was able to take ownership of an amazing variety of traditions, demonstrating, in the words of Mark Slobin, that »Nowhere is it safe to draw conclusions about what belongs to whom, because it isn't how the music s o u n d s , but how it can be t h o u g h t that counts«²⁰.

18 26/28 May 1949, in: Concert Programme. LAC 43/2.

19 Translation supplied on *Zemerl: The Interactive Database of Jewish Song*, in: <http://www.princeton.edu/~klez/zemerl/index.html> 28 January 2004.

20 Mark Slobin, *Micromusics of the West*, Hanover, NH 2000, p. xiii.