

# Animating the Archive

## *Old Records and Young Singers*

Zevi Steiger knew that he was different from other young men: sensitive and attuned to music and emotion, he sometimes got into trouble in Yeshivah for his chronic lateness, despite being an excellent student academically. As he told me, “Later I learned I’m not the only one. There are a lot of people who are creative, who are into art and stuff like that, that have difficulty with that.” Listening to old cantorial records and learning to sing the pieces he loved was the signal manifestation of his burgeoning creative identity.

Yanky Lemmer, the most commercially successful cantor among the participants in this study, told me that among his friends growing up, “they were into music but not khazones. I was the only oddball.” Being a fan of cantorial music was a marker of his nonconformity.

Yoel Kohn connects his love of khazones to a period of disaffected youth when he was “bored out of his mind”; when he was desperate for an aesthetic outlet that could express his developing world of feeling. Speaking about his cohort of young Hasidic cantorial revivalists, he said, “That’s part of what made us. We were all sort of artistic. We were deprived. We had no outlets. We had to focus inside. We had to become introspective in order to achieve any sort of artistic or creative outlet, any sort of creative climax.”

Shimmy Miller similarly described khazones as part of the emotional turbulence of a sensitive youth striving to define an adult identity. “It’s like it’s part of the transformation . . . It’s just part of the chronological order of things . . . You’re a teen. You have all kinds of things on your mind . . . So I started getting into listening to khazones, mainly old khazonim.” In another conversation with Shimmy, I asked him to elaborate on what it was about khazones that attracted some young Hasidic singers to this as their genre of choice. “They feel pulled to it. It’s

just an art form. You have something you're interested in, right? What drew you to khazones?"

This moment of ethnographic reversal felt significant to me—Shimmy was cautioning me against essentializing Hasidic musicians by ascribing a meaning to the Hasidic cantorial phenomenon that was qualitatively different from the aesthetic desires of other artistically inclined people, those without “marked” identities. Shimmy was advocating for his right to what philosopher Édouard Glissant calls *opacity*<sup>1</sup>—he was claiming the right to pursue abstraction and pure aesthetics that is often denied to people who have “visible identities” and who are expected by outsiders to represent their collectivities, not their own agentic desires.<sup>2</sup>

Shimmy was also drawing my attention to the fact that Hasidic cantorial revivalists have ascribed a surprising meaning to khazones: they understand century-old records of Jewish sacred music as an art form, along the lines of other music styles, that can illuminate an artistic path of nonconformity and self-discovery. These Hasidic singers share in common a conception of khazones as a genre that is appropriate for use in grappling with their world, defining a nonconforming social stance, and coming to terms with feelings of personal difference from the norm. Rather than viewing the music as primarily a conservative retention of an old form of Jewish religious practice, we should understand that khazones serves as a genre of performance and creative practice. This conception of the social potentials of the genre push against a strictly conceived binary between religious authority and conceptions of creativity. The engagement of Hasidic cantorial revivalists with khazones suggests a novel way of looking at the history of the music. It raises the question, what qualities inhere in gramophone-era cantorial music that make it appropriate as the basis for a nonconformist musical practice?

Conventional descriptions of cantorial music found in professional journals such as the *Journal of Synagogue Music (JSM)* tend to focus on the sacred function of the music and its role as a lever of cultural continuity. Samuel Rosenbaum, a Conservative cantor and frequent contributor to the *JSM* in the 1970s, expressed the opinion that “Hazzanut is a sanctity of Jewish life. It is intimately and eternally bound up with the mystical, mysterious process which we call prayer. It is both the message and the medium of the mirror to which we hold up our souls . . . It is the light by which we may, in a rare moment of incandescence, catch a glimpse of Him who is the Hearer of prayer.”<sup>3</sup> Rosenbaum’s stylized, sanctimonious, nearly Christologized view of the cantorate is echoed across writings about Jewish liturgical music. In the more conventionally phrased words of Josh Breitzer, the current cantor of Beth Elohim, a Reform synagogue in Brooklyn, “cantors are the vessels of Jewish musical tradition and innovators of public prayer. They lead worship, teach across the generations through melodies new and old, and help Jewish communities envision and enrich their spiritual lives.”<sup>4</sup>

Cantor Breitzer’s description of a cantor’s work reifies a commonly held conception of cantors as preservers of religious tradition and communal stability.

His description is also reminiscent of the popular understanding of the separatist Hasidic community: both cantors and Hasidic Jews are described from within and by outsider observers as being conservationist and concerned with cultivating holiness and piety. Definitions of cantorial music that focus on community maintenance and conventional expressions of public piety do not fit easily with the use of the music as a form of musical rebellion or an outpouring of adolescent angst. For Hasidic cantorial revivalists, khazones is a means toward framing an identity as an artist that is at odds with the cultural norms of their birth community, as defined by rabbinic leadership, and in opposition to the sounds of most contemporary synagogue life in America. Rather than being a means toward maintaining the boundaries of the community or the decorous sanctimony of tradition, cantorial music offers Hasidic singers a path toward an individualist pursuit of aesthetics and a heightening of experience beyond the norms of institutional life.

Thinking about the cantorial tradition as a site of contention over values and practices of identity formation encouraged me to take a deeper look at the history of cantorial music. In the following discussion of cantorial history, I explore the ways in which cantors have been embedded at the juncture of debates about creativity, modernity, sacred experience and the corruption of tradition. I focus here on the recorded cantorial legacy of the early twentieth century that forms the backbone of contemporary cantorial revivalist practices. Working with the revivalists' conception of cantorial music as a centripetal force acting on my reading of the historical record, I approach the archive of documentary evidence about the gramophone-era golden age with new questions about the controversial role of cantors in popular culture.

In this chapter, I approach the history of the golden age as a prehistory of its own revival, spotlighting those aspects of the story that are most germane to understanding the work of young Hasidic cantorial revivalists. My initial findings suggest that the music of the cantors of the gramophone era reflect the period of radical social change in which they worked. Recording star cantors occupied a nebulous place between the synagogue and popular music performance. Although they themselves were stars of new forms of media, they represented a style of Jewish prayer music that was meant to evoke the sounds of a disappearing Jewish folklore situated in the past. Cantors performed a theatrical version of premodernity, tailored to exploit the potentials of the most modern technologies.

Cantorial records present an *imagined ethnography*, offering a Jewish popular culture parallel to contemporary trends of musical nationalism that employed academic folklore and anthropological research to try to establish national music styles. The creativity and innovation characteristic of gramophone-era cantors served the goals of building national identity in an era of heightened nationalistic and collectivist sentiment. In this respect, cantors fit into the "invented tradition" musical nationalist trends of the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, cantors were deeply immersed in a set of musical practices with textual and musical

lineages that precede the efflorescence of musical nationalism and that reflect the experience of Jews as a marginalized and minoritized population occupying a tenuous and fringe position in European society. The work of cantors emerges from historically embedded lifeways, which defy a binary assessment of “invented” or “authentic.” What Michael Herzfeld calls “culturally intimate” practices are understood as representative of collective identity by members of a group.<sup>6</sup> Unlike some of their better-known contemporaries among urban conservatory-trained composers who were invested in the idea of folklore, perhaps best represented by Bela Bartok, cantors drew on their personal learning experiences in cantorial choirs and enculturation in small-town Jewish life to create a version of Jewish tradition that would be recognizable to Jewish audiences and that would retrospectively form a sense of what the past sounded like.

Cantors sought to illuminate a thread of folklore they felt themselves to be intimately connected to and therefore had the right to manipulate and transform through their creative endeavors. Both fiercely competitive in their pursuit of marketable originality *and* committed to preserving a conception of tradition, cantors were both custodians of the past and inventors of a broadly disseminated sonic representation of Jewish musical heritage. The work of recording star cantors was revered by fans, consumed by a mass audience, and simultaneously castigated as a corruption of tradition. The uses of the gramophone-era style by present-day Hasidic cantorial revivalists as a nonconformist art practice reflect the conflicting meanings and motivations that accompanied the music in the period of its production.

Following a discussion of the gramophone era of mediatized cantorial music, I will offer an outline of the role of cantors in the Hasidic context. Just as the musical innovations associated with the new technology of the gramophone heightened tensions already accruing around the figure of the cantor, the Hasidic community has its own history of castigation of the figure of the cantor. A perusal of teachings about music by Hasidic leaders and examples drawn from the cultural history of the movement illustrate how rabbinic leaders in the Hasidic community took a variety of attitudes toward the artistry of cantors. Alternating between condemning cantors for their excessive emphasis on aesthetics and embracing symbiotic relationships with cantors to further the charismatic draw of the Hasidic movement, leaders of the Hasidic community were ambivalent in their stance toward khazones. The multiplicity and contingency of attitudes around music and cantors in Hasidic contexts are strikingly similar to the range of attitudes and debates expressed in discourse among cantors and in the larger Jewish world. While attitudes toward cantors held by Hasidic leaders fit into larger dialogues in other Jewish contexts, they are inflected by the power dynamics and conservative focus on the maintenance of cultural norms that are specific to the community.

Finally, I will end the chapter with an ethnographic description of an intimate use of an old cantorial recording in the private study of a contemporary Hasidic

cantor. By zooming in on one example I will demonstrate how cantors use golden age recordings as objects of reflection, pedagogy and performance. Records have a transformative effect on the body of young singers, as they allow the recorded voices of dead cantors to resonate in their bodies, training and transforming the musculature of their vocal apparatus. In this way, the frozen recorded sound of the archive is animated into an intimate form, embodied in its presence in the work of living artists.

In the interior space of deep listening and learning, Hasidic cantorial revivalists imagine themselves identified with a kind of creative personhood that is not at home in any contemporary Jewish community. Old records of star cantors help these singers imagine a life that is yoked to tradition, through sound and text, while making room for nonconformity and creativity. As I argue across the chapters of this book, the cantors are working toward a future in which their nonconforming identities as artists and prayer leaders will coalesce with the emergence of new forms of community in which artists can function as ritual leaders and arbiters of sacred experience. This figure of the artist-ritualist, rooted in the stars of the imagined cantorial golden age, is not currently recognized in any Jewish American community.

#### WHAT IS THE CANTORIAL GOLDEN AGE?

The term *cantorial golden age* calls to mind a body of Jewish liturgical records produced by commercial record labels between 1901 and roughly 1950, primarily, but not exclusively, in Europe and the United States documenting the work of Eastern European cantors. The style documented on these records is often referred to by the Yiddish term *khazones*. During the period of the music's greatest popularity, star cantors sold records in the hundreds of thousands, conducted international performance careers across the Jewish Atlantic world and galvanized a mass listening public of urban Jews with a sound that represented the cultural intimacy of the synagogue.

Classic records of this period purported to document Jewish folklore. Cantors were working in parallel to the efforts of urban Jewish composers and the European nationalist composers who sought to imbue nationalist music movements with motifs gleaned from anthropological research and song collection expeditions to the rural "folk." Unlike figures such as Bela Bartok or Joel Engel, composers who conducted research into small-town European life in search of folk music, cantors had their own training as apprentice singers working with elder cantors to draw on in their construction of new synagogue music. Cantorial records of the gramophone era took on a quality as imagined ethnography, by means of which cantors presented popular audiences with a newly composed representation of the Jewish past. The mediated sound of cantorial records was yoked to the vanishing world of small-town European Jewish life, a milieu that took on a sacred character

during the period of urbanization, especially after the widescale destruction of World War I.

Two schema are constitutive of the way the music of gramophone-era cantors is understood by contemporary Hasidic cantorial revivalists, one focused on preservation, the other on creativity. In general, contemporary cantors do not accentuate or consciously draw attention to the tensions between these two images of the cantorial golden age. On the one hand, present-day practitioners tend to believe that the work of golden age cantors was preservationist and rooted in a folklore that largely disappeared after the Holocaust; it is sometimes described by present-day cantors fancifully, as connected to Jewish antiquity. At the same time, they also valorize the creativity of classic cantorial artists, praising their uniqueness and their innovative appropriation of sounds drawn from art music.

For Hasidic cantorial revivalists, as with artists working in other “named-system” revivalist music scenes,<sup>7</sup> the dualism of tradition and creativity is a point of repressed awareness; looking closely at the place of rupture offers a view into the meaning of the work and can be uncomfortable in its exposure of myths. These competing conceptions raise unresolved questions about contemporary cantors’ own creativity, and their sense of inadequacy or uncertainty about their creative capacities. In general, they are not composers; rather, they focus on reinterpreting old compositions and, to an extent, on working in an improvisatory style of prayer leading.

For the purposes of this discussion of golden age cantorial music, I adopt the normative claim that recording star cantors were “tradition bearers” who held knowledge of older streams of Jewish liturgical tradition. This is the viewpoint held by present-day cantors who look to old records for clues about what Jewish voices and melodies should sound like. The work of untangling and analyzing the stylistic layering of classic cantorial recordings would be a project unto itself that I refrain from pursuing at this time: it suffices to say that a variety of musical styles and genres contribute to the formation of the gramophone cantorial sound, including opera, operetta, and *Lieder*, in addition to Jewish folkloric sources. The contemporary cantors I discuss tend to rely on an unexamined notion of “tradition,” one they see as embodied in recorded khazones. Over the course of this book, I will endeavor to draw attention to the internal diversity that produced what is retrospectively understood simply as “tradition.”

The modern cantorial sound heard on classic recordings has its roots in the work of the Viennese cantor Salomon Sulzer (1804–90), the figure most associated with the reform of synagogue music through the introduction of choral music sounds borrowed from European art music and church music. Sulzer was alternately castigated as a disruptive force undermining tradition and celebrated as a preserver of tradition. His work responded to currents in the German-speaking world that sought to adopt the German language and Lutheran hymns into synagogue worship. In contrast, Sulzer was committed to preserving the traditional Hebrew liturgical texts. His anthology, *Schir Zion*, published in 1840, was among the first to

publish older prayer melodies, printed alongside newly commissioned pieces by Christian Viennese composers, including Franz Schubert. Sulzer's anthology was followed by an explosion of publishing across Europe of new works by cantors embracing the choral aesthetic, as well as works documenting older prayer melodies that were already seen as endangered and in need of preservation.<sup>8</sup>

According to cantors of the early twentieth century, Eastern European cantors were attracted to Sulzer's innovations, but saw his work as problematic in its rejection of stylistic traits that were understood as deeply representative of Jewish prayer sound. Samuel Vigoda, a recording star of the gramophone era, wrote in his anecdotal book of memoirs:

And who can tell how far the process of radical transformation of the old but still untarnished typical Jewish motifs would have gone, if not for the counter-revolutionary activities of the East European stalwart representatives of the "Chazzonut Haregesh," [Hebrew, feelingful cantorial music] who stood their ground, like bulwarks manning the ramparts, determined to preserve the precious treasure which had been handed down from the past . . .<sup>9</sup>

As Vigoda and other cantorial authors assert, a perception of an "East-West" divide emerged, with cantors in Russia and Poland styling themselves as preservers of older strands of Jewish sacred vocal music. At the same time, cantors in the urban centers of Eastern Europe embraced the prestigious role of the dignified and prestigious professionalized cantor, as well as embracing many Sulzerian musical innovations, especially the use of four-part choral composition.

Unlike in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where Jews were experiencing legal emancipation and integration, Russian Jews continued to live in a politically oppressive and volatile setting. The political motivations for musical "assimilation" were more abstract and less clearly tied to practical ends in the context of a system that specifically excluded Jews from participation in the rights and privileges of the state. Instead, Russian Jewish cantors looked to discourses of nationalism to help define a Jewish musical self-conception that was oriented toward achievement in high-status European art music while remaining invested in maintaining Jewish sonic difference. These developments arose against a Russian musical culture in which Jews became increasingly involved as producers and consumers of Western art music.<sup>10</sup> Around the turn of the twentieth century, an ethnographically tinged approach to composition emerged among cantors and choir directors composing for their positions in elite urban synagogues in Eastern Europe.

Russian synagogue music seems to have been influenced by late nineteenth-century trends in the conservatory, where the value of distinctive "national" musical characteristics was championed. Joel Engel, a student of Tchaikovsky, followed in the footsteps of nationalist trends in nineteenth-century art music, claiming ethnography as a key element in the founding of a uniquely Jewish musical concept.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Engel, whose musical enculturation largely excluded Jewish sources

and who sought to connect with Jewish sources through anthropological field research, cantors were generally trained in apprenticeship settings with elder cantors or in family musical lineages. Their personal connections to elder cantors and their embodied repertoires served as a source they could leverage into new music. The recorded cantorial archive offers an *imagined ethnography*, new works that purport to represent the past by drawing on popular conceptions of the sound of the collective, and in turn shaping conceptions of group identity through a reified vocabulary of culturally intimate sound distilled through processes of performance and mediatization.

As literary critic Dan Miron has suggested, the image of the shtetl, a Yiddish word for small town, has taken on a quality as a metonym for Jewish premodernity.<sup>12</sup> The aestheticized image of the shtetl in Yiddish literature forms the basis of a retrospective appraisal of the past. Just as the stories of Sholom Aleichem and Y. L. Peretz shaped a Jewish collective memory that threatens to usurp the historical record, cantors created compositions that offered stylized sonic representations of Jewish collectivity. Turning toward a primitivist aesthetic that imagined the future of Jewish music as emerging from its premodernity,<sup>13</sup> cantors looked to melodies and musical forms derived from synagogue oral traditions, small-town Jewish life, and Hasidic Jews for musical elements to be appropriated and aestheticized in musical compositions formally based in Western art music.

Jewish synagogue composers and choir directors such as David Novakovsky (1848–1921) and Baruch Schorr (1823–1904) were at the vanguard of a new, urban cantorial style that consciously sought to integrate older styles of cantorial vocal sounds and techniques into their new and innovative cantorial compositions. Virtuoso soloist vocal techniques, such as the distinctive cantorial coloratura and nonmetered recitative passages, were integrated into choral textures, initiating a new, syncretic synagogue style that was effective as a vehicle for tenor soloists. The cantors of urban synagogues had usually been trained in the cantorial apprenticeship system and held a vocabulary of vocal techniques and repertoires they had learned in an oral tradition context that they could bring to bear in their performances of new compositions.<sup>14</sup>

The technological innovation of the gramophone met cantors at a moment of debate about the appropriate kinds of music Jewish singers should perform and what kinds of sounds should be brought into elite urban synagogues. The first cantor to record was Selmar Cerini (1860–1923), a cantor in Breslau, who made his recording debut was in 1901. Cerini's life story represents the tensions between the synagogue and the allure of Western art music. Over the course of his career, he moved between performing opera roles, which he studied by transliterating librettos into the Hebrew alphabet, and synagogue prayer leading.<sup>15</sup> Cerini's prominence as ground breaker was eclipsed by the massive popularity of Gershon Sirota (1874–1943), the first international recording star of Jewish music. In addition to his best-selling records, Sirota's weekly prayer-leading services at the Tlomackie

Street Synagogue in Warsaw throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century were attended by a congregational audience that routinely numbered in the thousands. Sirota's tenor was marked by a declarative precision and overpowering upper register that marked him as one of the great vocal artists of the era and was compared frequently to opera stars. He was billed at times as "the Jewish Caruso," a marketing cliché that appears frequently in Yiddish press accounts of cantors.<sup>16</sup>

Zawel Kwartin (1874–1952) began his recording career in 1907 and rapidly propelled to success, with records reaching sales of five hundred thousand copies per year.<sup>17</sup> While Kwartin embraced his role as a star, taking pulpit positions at elite urban synagogues in Budapest, Vienna, and Saint Petersburg and concertizing in major concert halls throughout Europe and the United States, he cultivated a musical style in his compositions that moved away from the choral synagogue sound. In his autobiography, written at the end of his life, Kwartin asserts that the most significant influences on his style were the sounds of small-town prayer leaders in his village in Ukraine. Kwartin described his creative work as a rejection of Western art music. He wrote,

After a while I started to feel that the modern cantorial repertoire satisfied me less and less; I felt ever more drawn to conservation, orthodoxy and tradition. I started to search for compositions, recitatives and improvisations that stemmed from the great Orthodox cantors of the old traditional form. In Vienna I was successful in finding the melodies of Yerucham Hakatan [1798–1891], Nissi Belzer [1824–1906], [Wolf] Shestapol [1832–72]. I grew ever more absorbed in these unique compositions that were suffused with the perennially distinctive quality of Jewish life. But the more deeply I delved into these compositions, the more there grew in me the longing to be like them, the generations of cantors that piously and conveying fear of heaven sang out the tears and hidden longings of their people.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside his generational cohort of performers and critics in the Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia, Kwartin valorized nineteenth-century Jewish music figures. Cantors like Nissi Belzer were presented as an Eastern European counterpart to Sulzer and other Central European "Westernizing" composers. These cantors were not drawn from a mythological past but had been intimately familiar to the generation of "gramophone" cantors, a number of whom had trained as Belzer's choir singers.

The Jewish community in the United States entered what has been referred to as a "cantor craze" beginning in the 1880s, roughly coinciding with the period of Jewish mass immigration from Eastern Europe (ca. 1880–1924).<sup>19</sup> In a mirroring of the urban "choir synagogues" in the European capitals, Eastern European Jews built synagogues on a grand scale and hired star cantors imported from Europe to fill them. Cantors played a prominent role in the life of the community, ubiquitous in the Yiddish press and performing not only in synagogues but in major concert halls. The well-known Russian-born socialist activist and author Chaim Zhitlowsky (1865–1943) included cantorial music in a list of Jewish communal

matters that “reveals the ideals of the people’s culture.”<sup>20</sup> The conception of cantorial music as a distillation of Jewish historical experiences, especially those related to persecution and displacement, is frequently cited in the writings of Eastern European cantors working in the United States.<sup>21</sup>

In response to the intimate connections between cantors and new technologies, identities, and popular culture, a discourse of chastisement arose around cantors, focusing on their gramophone recordings. The lead voice in the antigramophone ideology was Pinchas Minkovsky (1859–1924), the cantor of the prestigious Broder Synagogue in Odessa. Minkovsky was not connected to emerging conservative Orthodox ideologies, and in fact was associated with the adoption of modern choral music into the Russian synagogue. He had been a student of Salomon Sulzer as a young man and, according to some accounts, had left his home of Berdichev under duress, having fallen afoul of the Hasidic community for his modernizing dress and musical innovations. In Odessa, Minkovsky had advocated for the inclusion of women in cantorial choirs in response to the norms of Western art music, and he later adopted the use of an organ, a key point of controversy in synagogues. Despite his ongoing struggles with rabbinic authorities and his adoption of musical innovations across his lifetime, Minkovsky was outspoken in his role as a cantorial “elder,” castigating the younger generation for their immoral expansion of the reach of cantorial performance into the new electric media, resulting in “a mix of impure and pure, of holiness and whoredom.”<sup>22</sup>

Minkovsky makes an unfavorable comparison between the innovations of his cantorial generation, which sought to elevate the Jewish people through appeals to prestigious and rarified styles of music, and the populist gramophone. Rather than a controlled appropriation of high-prestige elements of “non-Jewish” culture, records would facilitate anarchic eruptions of Jewish sound and feeling. Minkovsky suggests that gramophone cantorial records yoke Jews to unsavory elements of the non-Jewish world, degrading the sacred by making religious music available in the “secular” spaces of Jewish life.

In his 1910 book-length diatribe against cantorial gramophone recording, *Moderne liturgiye in unzere sinogogn in rusland* (Modern liturgy in our synagogues in Russia), Minkovsky deplores the effects that modern technologies have on sacred Jewish music. He asserts that cantorial records are a sign of the immoral times. By divorcing sacred music from the space of the synagogue, the affective power of the music inevitably will be abused for erotic or illicit purposes that are degrading to the cantorial profession in particular and the public reputation of the Jews in general. Minkovsky savages the gramophone with a litany of disjointed juxtapositions of the sacred and the profane. In one passage he quotes a conversation with a young man who claims to have listened to records of Gershon Sirota while visiting a brothel in Warsaw.<sup>23</sup>

In Minkovsky’s estimation, this hyperbolic and travesty verbal combat was necessary in order to muster the cantorial community against the allures of the

corrupting culture industry. Minkovsky was far from alone in reviling the gramophone and concert stage as twin vices challenging the dignity of the cantorial profession.<sup>24</sup> Publicizing the sacred sounds of the community outside the synagogue will have the effect of corrupting tradition, degrading the achievements of his generation of cantors who painstakingly built a conception of cantors as high-status artists within the community. Minkovsky frames his antigramophone rhetoric as a form of pastoral care, seeking to protect Jewish listeners who were being ensnared by the sensuality of cantors who refused to contain their outpourings of feeling in the appropriate container of culturally intimate Jewish spaces. As anthropologist Michael Herzfeld notes, artefacts that express intimately recognizable aspects of communal identity can be transformed into sources of embarrassing or degrading stereotypes when exposed as performance for the “outside” world.<sup>25</sup> Yet for those within the community, these signifiers of identity can be read differently as desired representations of an intimately recognizable portrait of the community.

In the aftermath of World War I and the destruction of Jewish small-town life, the theme of memorializing the Jewish folkloric past was heightened and expanded—notably, in the influential records made by Kwartin in New York in the 1920s. Cantorial vocal practices specific to the synagogue, which were understood by Jewish audiences to represent a folkloric style, were synthesized with elements of opera, which was undergoing its own popularization on record. The primary sound of cantorial music found on the interwar period records is commonly referred to as “nonmetered” setting of prayer texts, usually featuring a broad melodic range that emotively spotlights the powerful tenor upper register favored by cantors and their listeners. Cantors repurposed the term *recitative*, borrowed from opera, to refer to their compositions in a heavily ornamented vocal style.<sup>26</sup> The style of cantorial prayer leading in the synagogue associated with star cantors was characterized by extended soloist compositions utilizing an idiomatic vocabulary of vocal techniques, including coloratura, ornamentation, and vocal gestures such as the *krekhits*, or sob, which thematize emotion through noises suggestive of the sound of shedding tears.<sup>27</sup> Often, cantors were themselves composers or skilled improvisers.

The sense that cantors functioned as a “key to the Jewish soul,”<sup>28</sup> who spoke for the community was important in explaining the popularity of the music and the breadth of its reach beyond ritual contexts. Critics noted that khazones united socialists and Orthodox Jews in its fan base. Yossele Rosenblatt (1882–1933), the star cantor of the golden age most associated in contemporary memory with traditional religiosity, was a featured performer on benefit concerts organized by leftist labor organizations. Rosenblatt joked that “it would seem now that Yossele Rosenblatt takes the place of Karl Marx,” foreshadowing John Lennon’s quip about the Beatles being bigger than Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

An oft-repeated anecdote about Rosenblatt locates him at the center of the controversy between secular and religious sites of performance. Rosenblatt famously

refused a contract to sing at the Chicago Grand Opera Company in 1918, apparently at the insistence of the synagogue where he was employed at the time. Although this incident has been interpreted as a triumph of traditional piety over the corrupting influence of popular culture and assimilation, Rosenblatt was active in an even more populist arena of performance: the vaudeville circuit. Rosenblatt also took a star turn in *The Jazz Singer*, the first sound film made in 1927. Yiddish scholar and cultural critic Jeffrey Shandler notes that Rosenblatt was able to maintain a public persona as a representative of religious tradition through an assertive public relations strategy that was constructed in part through his visual presentation as a Hasidic Jew.<sup>30</sup> His “lapses” from the traditional space of cantorial performance in the synagogue, however, did not go uncriticized. Rosenblatt’s peer, the famed cantor Berele Chagy (1892–1954), wrote a scathing article in which he leveled a thinly veiled attack on Rosenblatt:

Our concerts have been turned into actual vaudeville: twenty cantors on one concert for fifteen cents a ticket, which makes a cent and a half a cantor. Cantorial beards in the vaudeville houses. Where earlier there appeared dogs on bicycles, naked lady dancers dancing the well-known shimmy, and for the finale the “main attraction,” a cantor with a beard and a yarmulke with a *siddur* [Hebrew, prayer book].<sup>31</sup>

While the association of cantors with popular culture was a source of controversy, performance venues outside the synagogue created opportunities for singers with nonconforming identities to become performers of sacred music. As Judah Cohen has argued, the establishment of a professional cantorate in the nineteenth century had the impact of excluding women prayer leaders from the emergent “modern” synagogue.<sup>32</sup> Radio, gramophone records, and the Yiddish theater stage offered new venues to women cantors, who were often referred to by the Yiddish term *khazente*. Singers such as Sophie Kurtzer (1896–1974) and Perele Feig (1910–87) sang repertoires associated with male cantors, creating a sense of gender ambiguity in their presentation of sacred music that was complimented by their performance attire in cantorial robe, *tallis* (Hebrew, prayer shawl) and mitre.<sup>33</sup>

Male cantors, perhaps responding to the absence of female voices in the public prayer space, appropriated elements of sonic “femininity.” Cantors cultivated a repertoire of emotive vocal “noises” imitative of the sounds of crying, defying Western gender binaries that associate masculinity with control over emotional expressiveness. Star cantors, notably Chagy and Rosenblatt, were celebrated for their falsetto work. At pivotal emotive moments in their recorded compositions, they would erupt into virtuosic passages in a stylized vocal range that blurred normative distinctions between male and female voices.

In the years after World War II, the prevalence of cantors in popular culture went into decline. Major record labels jettisoned their “ethnic” record departments, and Yiddish-language print media contracted. The cantorate shifted its emphasis from the cultivation of star careers and idiosyncratic soloists serving

the immigrant community, to the establishment of a unionized and seminary-trained work force that was prepared to serve in the proliferation of suburban synagogues serving acculturated second- and third-generation Jewish Americans. But the decline narrative that dominates in contemporary discussions of the cantorial golden age misses the continued popularity into the mid-twentieth century of cantors who continued to perform in the khazones idiom and record on smaller record labels marketed and distributed within the Jewish community.

The Malavsky Family Choir is a notable example of khazones continuity into the post-Holocaust period in the United States. Helmed by Samuel Malavsky (1894–1983), a protégé of Rosenblatt, and featuring his daughter Goldie Malavsky (1923–95) as lead soloist, the Malavsky's cultivated a sound inspired by the *meshoyrer* (Yiddish, cantorial choir singer) sound reminiscent of cantors in the Russian Pale of Settlement in which Samuel was born and got his professional start. The Malavsky's popular recordings also drew on sounds of jazz and pop music in their distinctive arrangements. The Malavskys were out of step with the conservative norms of the American synagogue, particularly with regard to their flexible approach to gender in sacred music. To avoid the regulation of Jewish religious institutions, they produced their own services and concerts outside the synagogues in theaters and Jewish resorts.

Although Malavsky and his generational peers, including Moishe Oysher (1906–58), Moshe Koussevitzky (1899–1965), and Moshe Ganchoff (1904–97), continued to present khazones on record, in concert and in prayer-leading services into the second half of the twentieth century, the footprint of their style was greatly diminished in American Jewish life. The gramophone-era style, characterized by an ideal of dramatic intensity, emotive noisiness, and stylized Jewish vocal techniques, may have been a victim of its own success in representing the cultural preferences of the immigrant Jewish milieu. Targeted as anachronistic by the seminary-trained professional cantorate, and simply unfamiliar to second-generation American Jews who were acculturated into the norms of popular culture, khazones took a subordinate role in the development of Jewish American liturgical music.<sup>34</sup>

New forms of comportment during ritual in the emerging American synagogues of the post-World War II period promoted an ideal of decorum and bodily restraint during services, distinct from the noisiness of immigrant synagogues.<sup>35</sup> New embodied attitudes in American synagogue social life perhaps had an effect in diminishing the social basis of cantorial performance. Consumers of khazones in synagogue engaged in forms of participatory listening that we have only scant information about. In field recordings of mid-twentieth century prayer services led by elder cantors and in the rare present-day Orthodox services where a cantor presides and performance is intentionally foregrounded, we can perceive that the congregants, despite the concert-like presentational form of the service, participate in the creation of the service. Congregant participation in cantorial prayer leading was far from silent. Congregants made themselves audible through sound-generating

movement and gesture, and knowledge of Hebrew prayer texts that participants recited aloud, sometimes in a heterophonic fog of unsteady unison with the cantor.<sup>36</sup> The shared knowledge of prayer performance seems to have played a role in shaping the phenomenon of star cantorial performance in the synagogue, bridging the space between performer and listener and creating a sense of shared experience rather than a dynamic of power being hoarded by the cantor in the expression of prayer.

Although new recordings of khazones slowed after the Holocaust, in the late 1950s Jewish record labels began to reissue compilation LPs of classic recordings that had originally been released as 78rpm singles. Labels operating in Brooklyn starting in the 1960s, such as the Greater Recording Company and the Collectors Guild, released anthologies on LP and cassette of cantorial 78rpm records from the pre-World War II era. These records were distributed primarily by Judaica bookshop retailers. Reissue anthologies have insured that the sounds of classic cantorial recordings have never completely disappeared. Reissue anthologies have also stabilized a standard repertoire focused on a few dozen performers who have come to be looked on as the masters, largely because of their commercial success and the preservation of their voices on recordings. Not surprisingly, female voices were excluded from the representation of the cantor's voice on the key anthologies that have shaped present-day conceptions of cantorial artistry and achievement.

#### CANTORS AND HASIDISM IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The innovations and controversies of the gramophone era extended and heightened tensions around cantors that were long-standing throughout the Jewish world, including in the Hasidic community. In parallel to debates between elite cantors and critics writing in the secular Yiddish press, the profile of cantors as nonconformist figures with a blurry ethical profile was also prominent in Hasidic discourse about music and prayer. These debates did not keep Hasidic leaders from calling on cantors to represent the community at times, expediently leveraging the popularity of artists to heighten the charismatic draw of the Hasidic rabbinic elite.

As in its approach to religious practices and rituals, an attitude of traditionalism adheres in the Hasidic musical sphere. In practice, however, Hasidic music is characterized by a tendency to borrow from non-Jewish musical sources, a custom that has accrued its own theological explanations. Complex and, at times, contradictory attitudes toward music in the contemporary Hasidic community are traceable to tensions in the theological discourses of foundational rabbinic figures. The potential for music to serve as an invigorating aspect of sacred experience was universally acknowledged by the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov and their antecedents, who employed music as a form of outreach to new followers.<sup>37</sup> Hasidic conceptions about what forms of music could be acceptable for the multiple needs of the community are not consistent. Two contrasting views of music asserted themselves that are relevant to the Hasidic cantorial scene.

On the one hand, Hasidic rabbis argued that music from aesthetically desirable non-Jewish repertoires was a legitimate source for worship music. They justified this attitude, which is seemingly at odds with the Hasidic rejection of the non-Jewish world, through recourse to the kabbalistic doctrine of divine sparks trapped inside unholy husks.<sup>38</sup> The metaphor of returning holy sparks to their source is frequently cited to describe the process of appropriating melodies into the Jewish sound world. In a famous story told about the rebbe of Koliv, Isaac Taube (1751–1821), the revered Hasidic leader payed a non-Jewish shepherd to teach him a melody that he believed to have been derived from the song of the ancient Levites. In the process of this purchase, the shepherd lost his ability to sing the song, thus “proving” that the song had been thoroughly imbibed into its new Jewish sacred context.<sup>39</sup> Melodies were described allegorically as existing in a state of exile, like the Jewish people themselves. The intrinsic holiness of a melody can be accessed by restoring the melody to its imagined source through performance in Jewish ritual or a devotional context. This doctrine stresses the sacred potentials of appropriation and aesthetics over the perceived ethical valences of the provenance of a piece of music. The positive valuation of aesthetics as the basis for spiritual practices would seem to work in the favor of cantors, who have long been accused of aesthetic excess.

Other Hasidic rabbinic authorities opposed integration of music that was perceived as excessively aesthetic, especially when that excess is derived from explicitly non-Jewish sources. Along these lines of reasoning, cantors have been reproached for similar kinds of cultural borrowing that Hasidic rabbis were celebrated for. The Levitical theme of idolatry imported into the Jewish worship space has haunted cantors for centuries, in part because their work was so often a staging ground for borrowing elements from the surrounding non-Jewish culture.<sup>40</sup> Hasidic discussions of the ethical import of music continued these musical debates and anxieties. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772–1810), a great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, developed a doctrine of positive and negative aspects of the divine that he applied to discussions of music. His theological innovations stress the power of music to influence internal spiritual processes that have mystical potentials to resonate beyond the human realm.<sup>41</sup> Nachman’s writings on music are primarily associated with a mainstream Hasidic celebratory approach to music’s spiritual powers, yet these mystical interpretations set the stakes high in the discussion of musical powers—music can achieve either spiritual repair or corruption, rendering close speculation of music and musicians a necessity for protecting the community and its spiritual integrity. These ethical concerns map onto negotiations over control of the experience of prayer and the locus of power in the intimate space of the synagogue.

The musical form most thoroughly associated with Hasidism, both among non-Hasidic Jews and Hasidim themselves, is the *nigun* (plural, *nigunim*).<sup>42</sup> *Nigun* is a Hebrew/Yiddish word that means melody, but in the Hasidic context it is used to

describe a genre of devotional melodies, frequently sung without words. Nigunim are typically sung in group unison as part of paraliturgical gatherings, such as the *rebbe's tish* (Yiddish, the Rabbi's table), a gathering at which a Hasidic leader gathers together with his disciples in gender segregated all-male spaces. As Ellen Koskoff has argued in her study of the Brooklyn Hasidic Lubavitch sect, singing nigunim offers Hasidic Jews an opportunity to perform their identities as members of the group, strengthening their ties to their spiritual leader and to other Hasidim.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the positive associations with communal melodies and nonprofessionalized paraliturgical music performance, khazones has held a more ambivalent place in the Hasidic world, both historically and today. The issues at stake in defining the appropriate music for prayer leading are both musical and social. Since at least the medieval period, cantors, as a professionalized class of musicians, have been routinely suspected of aesthetic innovations that are unsuitable to the Jewish experience of prayer.<sup>44</sup> A denigrating attitude toward cantors is far from unique to Hasidic authorities but it has a distinct cast in the Hasidic context inflected by their antimodernizing separatist doctrine.

Hasidic hierarchies of power are specifically built around the rebbe and his lineage. Investing musicians with spiritual authority was seen by some rebbes as a challenge to both spiritual purity and the retention of dynastic power. Writing in 1864, Hayim Halberstam, the rebbe of Zana, condemned in no uncertain terms the hiring of a cantor by one of the communities he had influence over, admonishing a synagogue leader to "let the fear of God be awakened in your heart to smite the crown of the wicked and to drive out from the house of the Lord the hazzan and his helpers."<sup>45</sup> Halberstam stressed that the theatrical music of a cantor could never compare to the spiritual purity of a tsadik's prayer. This imperative to reserve the right to lead prayer for the rebbe himself is reflected today in some Brooklyn Hasidic communities.

Hayim Halberstam's unambiguous condemnation was on the far end of the spectrum of attitudes about cantorial prayer music. Other Hasidic rabbis held a more practical approach to cantors, employing them in their courts or patronizing traveling cantors to cultivate an atmosphere of musically heightened experience that would symbiotically add to their charisma. Examples of rabbis who patronized cantors include the Baal Shem Tov himself; he was purported to have inspired a disciple to embrace a career as a cantor who was henceforth closely associated with the great leader.<sup>46</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, as the grand court system of Hasidic leaders was ascendant, some rebbes derived benefit from the talents of their personal cantors whose musical skill represented the holiness of the spiritual leader they served. In the politics of cantorial hiring in the heavily Hasidic milieu of the Ukraine in the late nineteenth century, support of a cantor sometimes acted as a proxy for allegiance to the Hasidic rebbe the cantor was associated with.<sup>47</sup>

For some Hasidic leaders, developing a profile as a patron of cantorial music was key to the success of their charismatic outreach. The influential Rabbi David of

Tolnoe (1808–82) worked closely with a cantor named Yossele Tolner, who served both as a prayer leader and a composer of popular nigunim. Yossele's melodies were cited as an important tool in Rabbi David's successful campaigns to recruit Hasidim to his court. Yet Rabbi David was not limited to his personal court *bal tefile* in working with musicians to create a richly expressive atmosphere in his home base of Tolnoe. He was also a patron of Nissi Belzer, a figure who is often cited as the most popular and broadly influential cantor of late-nineteenth-century Russia. According to Pinchas Minkovsky, who began his career as a choir-boy with Nissi Belzer, Rabbi David's patronage of the famed cantor was not unique; he also claimed that all of the most prominent cantors had Hasidic patrons who vouched for the sacred legitimacy of their music.<sup>48</sup> Another example of musical life in an elite Hasidic court was Tchorikov under the leadership of Rabbi David Moshe (1828–1904). His court was able to attract Mannish Khazn, a renowned cantor who had trained in a German "choral synagogue." The Hasidic community of Tchorikov boasted a choir that, in addition to singing pieces by famed cantors such as Yeruchom Hakoton and Belzer, also performed works by Handel, Schubert, Mozart and other European art music composers.<sup>49</sup>

The support of rebbes were foundational to the careers of cantors such as Zeidel Rovner (1856–1943) and Yossele Rosenblatt, two key figures of early twentieth-century cantorial music who developed international careers. Rovner was first encouraged to become a cantor at the urging of Rabbi Yaakov Yitschok Twersky, the Makarover rebbe, in 1881. In turn, the Makarover rebbe cultivated a relationship with Rovner, a popular artist whose work came to be seen as infused with the holiness of the rabbinic court, adding to the prestige of his spiritual sponsor.<sup>50</sup> Rosenblatt, the best-known figure of the gramophone era, obtained his first cantorial appointment by merit of the endorsement of the Sadigurer rebbe in 1900.<sup>51</sup> In their support of cantors, these Hasidic rebbes were not acting in a uniquely Hasidic manner; rather, they resembled the rest of the Jewish world. Jewish institutions of a variety of cultural and religious standpoints drew on the popularity of cantors to attract energy to synagogues and to fundraise for communal undertakings.

A clear line of demarcation between khazones and Hasidic Judaism is difficult to draw. This is in part because many of the best-known figures of the modern cantorial golden age, whose dossiers included theater performance, opera, and mass media, were born into Hasidic families. Peering into the biographies of famous cantors can cause a degree of confusion between supposedly stable categories of traditionalism and modernization that these two spheres of Jewish life are often presumed to occupy. Some of the star cantors continued to identify as Hasidic later in their careers as they assumed identities as modern, assimilated artists who ceased to adhere to the lifeways and sartorial conformity associated with Hasidism. For example, Ben Zion Kapov Kagan (1899–1953), a gramophone star with a public image as a modern Jew who served a controversial term as president of the *khazonim farbund* (cantorial union), during which he advocated for cantors

to join the American Federation of Labor, was also an adherent of Rabbi Isaac Heschel, the Mezbyzher rebbe. This association between cantor and rebbe began in Odessa but was maintained in New York after Kapov Kagan's immigration and subsequent high-profile recording career.<sup>52</sup>

In their recordings and performances in the United States, cantors took on the role of champions of old world Jewish memory, an area of concern that was shared with Hasidic leaders. Figures in the popularization of cantorial music in the United States, such as Pierre Pinchik (1900–1971) and Leib Glantz (1898–1964), were praised by fans as representatives of a Hasidic musical approach, indicating an assessment based on a generalized sense of their heartfelt emotion and regarding the specifics of their musical approach, such as the inclusion of nigun-like motifs.<sup>53</sup> These artists were distinctly not Hasidic in their personal and professional lives: Pinchik worked as a state-sponsored folk singer in the early Soviet era in Russia; after immigration to the United States, he was notorious for his nonconformity to religious conventions. Glantz, while maintaining religious orthodoxy in his personal life, was an ardent socialist and Zionist political activist.<sup>54</sup> Yet these “modern” cantorial stars were not completely cast out from the musical life of Hasidic Jews. A few of their most famous pieces are maintained in Hasidic public memory through cover versions by mainstream Hasidic musicians. In particular, Pinchik's classic 1928 recording of “Rozo D'Shabbos” has a special salience in the Hasidic community and has been performed and recorded by numerous Hasidic singers and bal tefiles.<sup>55</sup> This is in part because the text for the piece is drawn from the *nusakh sefard* variant of the prayer book used by Hasidic Jews. Comparing the approach to timbre, breath control, and ornament in Pinchik's original to the approach of contemporary Hasidic bal tefiles who sing his composition is illustrative of the stylistic differences in these two different approaches to prayer leading, even as the bal tefile and cantorial forms of prayer leading overlap in their repertoires.

The blurry line between khazones and American Hasidic musical life is illustrated by the career of Cantor Moshe Teleshevsky (1927–2012). Teleshevsky was born in Russia into a cantorial family with ties to Chabad Hasidism. After immigrating to the United States, he continued to work as a cantor, serving the Modern Orthodox congregation Agudath Sholom in the Flatbush neighborhood in Brooklyn, while at the same time he maintained his ties to Chabad. His two cantorial albums, released on small independent labels and with no date listed on their packaging but apparently from the late 1960s, are in a khazones style. The liner notes of both albums state explicitly, “The cantorial renditions are in the style of the great Cantor Pinchik.” Teleshevsky also sings on the 1965 album *Chabad Nigunim Vol. 5*, where he is featured as an expert representing the communal musical repertoires of Chabad Hasidim. In these recording efforts, Teleshevsky is heard code-switching between two distinct vocal affects: the cantorial vocal style characterized by a bel canto timbral approach, virtuosic coloratura singing, and a wide vocal range; and the Hasidic bal tefile style, characterized by a smaller

melodic ambitus, a rough-hewn approach to breath control, and a less controlled approach to ornamentation.<sup>56</sup>

The Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), voiced a critical attitude toward khazones, comparing the artistry of cantors unfavorably to the putative spiritual purity of nonprofessional prayer leaders: “A ba’al t’fillah for the most part brings out the best in worshipers, whereas a hazzan for the most part causes them to sin.”<sup>57</sup> “Chabad houses,” community centers established by the Lubavitch community in almost every corner of the world where Jews live, offer services usually led by the local rabbi and generally do not employ cantors. Some cantors hold the view that Chabad houses have undermined the cantorial profession and the aesthetics of prayer. Yet Teleshevsky worked at times within the community as a purveyor of classic cantorial repertoire, at the request of the rebbe himself. Teleshevsky was frequently called on to sing Israel Schorr’s popular piece “Yehi Rotzon Sheyibone Beis-Hamikdosh” (recorded in 1927) at mass meetings presided over by Schneerson. This piece was a favorite because of its messianically oriented text, which accorded with Schneerson’s mission to usher in the era of redemption.<sup>58</sup>

Despite a dearth of communal support for professional cantorial performance, in the late twentieth century several prominent cantors emerged from the Hasidic world, including Benzion Miller (born 1945) and Yitzchak Helfgot (born 1969). Notably, both Miller and Helfgot were born outside the United States, Miller in a displaced persons camp in Germany in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and Helfgot in Israel. Miller and Helfgot are singers with exceptional vocal talents who became international stars working in prestigious orchestral concert contexts, often in Europe and Israel. In particular, Helfgot’s collaboration with Itzhak Perlman on the major record label release *Eternal Echoes* (2012) seems to have played a role in broadening the sense of cantorial performance as an attractive form of performance with possibilities for popular reception among young Hasidic singers. The careers of Miller and Helfgot were perceived as outliers by fans of cantorial music, who were at first unaccustomed to cantors with publicly visible Hasidic identities.<sup>59</sup>

The story of cantors and their reception in the Hasidic world is characterized by contingency. Hasidic rabbis have called on cantors and their music to raise the profile of their charismatic courts when it has suited the specific needs of the moment. In other cases, Hasidic leaders have chastised and opposed cantors. What emerges from this discussion of cantors and rebbes is a picture of artists with an unclear status and a potential to receive approbation from a leadership class invested in maintaining the ethical and political stability of the community. Unlike singers of communally sanctioned repertoires whose music is made and received primarily within the Hasidic world, cantors are more vulnerable because of the association of their music with non-Hasidic and, at times, non-Jewish communities. Historical precedents for the rejection of cantors by the Hasidic community reach into

the lives of contemporary Hasidic cantorial revivalists, sowing instability in their attempts to establish themselves as prayer leaders and popular artists.

Hasidic cantorial revivalists today reject the ideology that castigates golden age cantors as spiritually corrupted by excessive commercialism or as degraded by their association with mass media and (non-Jewish) popular culture. They look to the gramophone era for reliable testimony about the sounds of the Jewish past and as a genre of art music on which to base their creative pursuits. Cantorial revival bears a utopian stamp—it is a musical pursuit that seeks an answer to musical needs in the present through sounds of the past, bypassing concerns with legibility to contemporary audiences or the possibilities of commercial success. Like other kinds of artist who are antinormative in their aesthetic commitments, Hasidic cantorial revivalists gesture toward a future that cannot yet be imagined. At the moment, these possibilities are realized primarily in the space of music-making communities outside the mainstream, focused on individuals and their artistry, not yet legible to a broad listening public. Their art practice is preparatory toward a future in which artists with outsider identities can elevate and expand the possibilities of Jewish ritual as a transformative social and aesthetic experience.

#### ANIMATING THE ARCHIVE, CREATING THE FUTURE

Hasidic cantorial revivalists encounter cantorial records in two primary settings: in the context of listening as part of a homosocial environment shared with other cognoscenti, and as learners delving into the material, usually with specific goals of mastering new pieces. Cantor Yanky Lemmer described listening to the cantorial radio show Thursday nights on WSNR hosted by Charlie Bernhaut every week with his father as a child.<sup>60</sup> This weekly session of listening was treated as “the Holy of Holies” by his father, who demanded total silence while listening. Yoel Kohn describes listening to cantorial records as part of a homosocial experience with male members of his family across generations, with loud conversations comparing the virtues of different cantorial voices cutting across the music playing on the stereo. On occasions when I listened to records with Yoel, he offered a continuous commentary on the music while we listened. Zevi Steiger offered a similar portrait of social listening to records with his dorm roommates at yeshivah, who, by good fortune, included a few other cantorial fans. Steiger recalls the desire to impress his friends as being a motivator to expand his knowledge of cantorial music.

In the context of the highly structured and conformist Hasidic community, the impassioned cantorial subculture might appear to have some of the trappings of a rebellion against institutional authority. My ethnography suggests that rebellion against Hasidic identity is not a primary motivation for the work of cantorial revival. Rather than playing a role in establishing a “secular” identity outside the community, immersing themselves in the archive of cantorial records allows Hasidic cantorial revivalists to explore the boundaries of prescribed behaviors for

Orthodox Jewish men. Their music creates a space in which potentially subversive aesthetic pursuits are integrated into a set of practices that are at their core deeply concerned with cultural preservation and a theology of dialogue with the divine. Even Yoel Kohn, the only participant in this project with an outspokenly antiauthoritarian and antireligious public identity, is an intense traditionalist when it comes to cantorial music. He frames cantorial performance as deriving the signature aesthetic friction that he venerates from the urgency of cantorial dialogue with the divine, even if he no longer believes in the God he addresses in prayer. In Yoel's words, "it's the screaming that matters, not who you're screaming at."

In contrast to the boisterous scenes of musical sociality recounted by Steiger and Kohn, listening as an act of learning typically takes place in solitary concentration and has a devotional quality. In a video that Yoel Kohn shared with me, Yoel is revealed in a private moment studying Yossele Rosenblatt's classic recording "Ribono Shel Olam," originally recorded in 1927 at the Victor Records studio in Camden, New Jersey. The video is an intrusion into the mystique of the virtuoso performer, revealing the patient relationship he bears to his source material. In the practice video, Yoel closely follows the vocal line on the original record, singing along, sometimes anticipating Rosenblatt, sometimes tightly following the original recording. As Yoel jokes in a mix of Yiddish and English to his friend, who is off camera holding a cellphone and filming him, "*Gibst oys di soydes fin khayder* [You're giving away mystical secrets], it's a terrible thing. Obviously *der malakh Gavril iz mir nit gekimen lernen keyn Yosseles in mitn di nakht* [the angel Gabriel doesn't come and teach me Yossele's (pieces) in the middle of the night]."

The video shows Yoel polishing his performance, learning the small details of Rosenblatt's vocal nuances and ornamentations. These types of details give vibrancy to Yoel's performance and help him hone a sound that adheres to the intonation of the classic cantorial records. The video also demonstrates the learning trajectory that led up to the moment being filmed. Yoel's vocal musculature is already remarkably homed in on what is heard on the recording. Rosenblatt's performance offers a template for how to perform a cantorial coloratura that Yoel has spent a great deal of time learning to replicate with a remarkable degree of verisimilitude. Yoel actually begins almost every phrase of *Ribono Shel Olam* by singing the phrase *before* Rosenblatt begins singing on the record. Yoel has already nearly mastered the piece but desires a degree of precision before he will begin to feel comfortable taking liberties with the piece in the context of performance. The record is so familiar to Yoel that he betrays a hint of impatience with the record. He seems to be eagerly seeking the moments in the recording where he has not yet fully mastered Rosenblatt's phrasing.

In the practice video, we can see a variety of forms of embodied response to the music. Yoel evinces an ebb and flow of physical tension, expressed through his mannerisms of holding his face, stroking his beard, and knitting his brow. These gestures are more pronounced during the moments of intense concentration

when Yoel is pushing himself to hear new details in the already familiar recording. His relaxation when he allows himself to “simply” listen is visible in the stillness of his bodily comportment.

Although Yoel’s mastery of classic recorded material has reached an elevated level of sophistication, internal debate persists for him about how best to implement his knowledge. For Yoel and his generational cohort of cantorial revivalists, questions abound about how to develop their own creative voices. Performing “covers” of classic records is a standard practice for Hasidic cantorial revivalists but it is fraught—both because of fears of being compared unfavorably by audiences to the legends of the genre and because of internal anxieties about being inadequately creative as artists. At times, Yoel is filled with self-doubt about his own ability to live up to the creative example of his heroes. These insecurities are keenly felt and they offer a discursive space for aesthetic self-examination. As Yoel told me:

Like I said, I had a long transition from being a, from thinking, it’s almost like davening [Yiddish-English, prayer leading] with *ta’amey hamikra* [Hebrew, the markings that notate Torah cantillation]. *This* has to be said *this* way. *This* has to be said *this* way. Work it out [i.e., in advance], have a *shtikl* [Yiddish, cantorial composition], have a piece. Be prepared. And going to a place where I don’t daven the same thing twice. Because I want to enjoy the davening too . . . I started doing that and I started enjoying it. And I realized, holy crap, you can actually enjoy davening. It was a mind-blowing realization for me. I don’t think I’m in an improvisational freedom where I want to be. I tend to get stuck in a single mode. That’s a problem for me. And I, looking around, I don’t want to mention, I don’t have to mention names, but looking around I see everyone else is struggling with the same thing. It’s very hard for us. (Interview, January 15, 2019)

In this statement Yoel draws a comparison between the work of cantors who are completely dependent on recorded music for their prayer leading to a Torah reader who is compelled by synagogue tradition to rely on *trop*, the traditional Jewish system of neumatic musical notation for scriptural chanting, in order to chant the text with the correct melodic figuration. Unlike the Torah reader, for whom the legitimacy of ritual performance lies in strict adherence to the prescribed melodic patterns, Yoel suggests that strict adherence to recorded cantorial sources actually undermines the validity of cantorial artistry. The gramophone culture that created the classic cantorial canon demanded that cantors squeeze their creativity into neatly entextualized three-minute-long versions of Jewish prayer sound, sealed off from the liveness and spontaneity of prayer in ritual contexts. Ethnomusicologist Regula Qureshi has suggested that in the case of musical forms that have been mediated by gramophone reproduction, two musical cultures emerge: the recorded form, which is shaped by the contingencies of technological limitation and the demands of marketing and distribution networks, and the live form revealed in performance contexts.<sup>61</sup> Yoel observes of current cantors that the

recorded form shapes expectations of the performance of the live, with old records insinuating themselves into moments of prayer performance and influencing musical choices both on the level of stylistic vocal comportment and in terms of repertoire selections.

You have so many people, every *kvetsch* [Yiddish, whine, here used to mean ornament or stylized vocal break that imitates the sound of crying] they do is a Koussevitzky imitation [Moshe Koussevitzky, 1899–1966]. So, you got a lot of little Koussevitzkys going around. And at some point, it becomes boring. Now Koussevitzky himself had a wider range of building blocks of improvisation than the people who imitate him because he was musical. He wasn't imitating Koussevitzky [*laughs*]. So that seems to be the go-to style. (Yoel Kohn interview, January 15, 2019)

In Yoel's estimation, being a "little Koussevitzky" does an injustice to the art form. He offers his own path toward being able to spontaneously create within the context of cantorial prayer leading as an example of successful appropriation of cantorial identity and artistic function. Yoel is not satisfied with his current level of creative fluidity, a sign of his dedication to his craft and the unfolding, nonlinear nature of the revivalist musician's learning process. As Yoel suggests, there is a jagged relationship between learning cantorial classic pieces from old records and developing the skills of a prayer leader.

In the following chapters I will explore how Hasidic cantorial revivalists take their intimate knowledge of old records into new communities. The personal project of mastery of cantorial repertoire and the resulting artistry of these musicians begs for recognition and requited love from listeners. Attaining this kind of communication with an audience is challenged by the multiple streams of reception that cantors have encountered in the past and the limitations on the life of khazones in the contemporary Jewish world. The skills carefully cultivated by revivalists who can interpret music heard on old records are not necessarily suited to the needs of a synagogue cantor. In their attempts at professionalization and employment, Hasidic cantorial revivalists run into a set of limitations that have challenged all professional cantors for at least the last fifty years. The next chapters will focus on how Hasidic cantorial revivalists transform their knowledge of old cantorial records into the requisite skill set for employment. But at the outset I will offer the first of three Interludes in which we will get a closer look at the lives and music of the cantors. Through a portrait of the Lemmer brothers, Yanky and Shulem, I will paint a picture of the world of music in the Hasidic community and the problematic fit of cantorial performance in Orthodox Jewish American life. The story of the Lemmer brothers echoes both the history of conflict between cantors and the Hasidic community, and the exuberance and aesthetic explorations of the gramophone-era cantors.