
Learning *Nusakh*

Cultivating Skill and Ideology in the Cantorial Training Studio

Noah Schall is so old he taught my grandfather. When I visited him in his house in the Five Towns region of Long Island, he regaled me with stories about many generations of cantors, including my grandfather Jacob Konigsberg as a young man. He recalled Konigsberg's vocal talent—"he had some special notes"—words of high praise from a man of strong judgements and decisive musical opinions. He also remembered how my grandfather, a temperamental artist even as a novice cantor, would sometimes yell at *him*, the teacher, for being critical of his singing.

Noah and I would sit together in the small, cramped study in the back of his house, next to an antique upright piano and bookshelves overflowing with Jewish sacred books and cantorial sheet music. Old music manuscripts poured out of cardboard boxes. On top of one pile was a handwritten sheet of music from an anonymous cantor in Odessa; the yellowed piece of paper was over one hundred years old. It is in this room where Schall meets with his cantorial students, including several of the participants in my research with Hasidic cantors.

Schall began his career as a cantorial pedagogue when he was still a teenager. He was born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn in 1929, the son of a singer who worked with the legendary Russian-born cantorial composer and choir leader Zeidel Rovner (1856–1943).¹ Rovner's son Elias, also a cantor and composer, taught Schall to read music and was his first music teacher. During his first forays into cantorial pedagogy, Schall would offer his services to up-and-coming cantors who could not read music. His students would bring him sheet music they had bought or otherwise acquired and Schall would teach them how to sing it. At first, he would barter his services for access to unpublished written music by important cantorial



FIGURE 1. Noah Schall. Photo by the author.

composers, copying out pieces by hand and developing the personal library that was to become an important part of his professional identity.

Over the better part of a century Schall has been training cantors, producing cantorial records, and publishing anthologies of cantorial scores, including his own prolific output of original compositions.² He has taught at all three of

the cantorial training programs associated with the seminaries of the three main branches of American Judaism: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. Throughout his career, he has maintained his own private cantorial training studio. He has advised professional cantors, helping some of the best-known artists in the field develop material for concerts and recording, especially Moshe Ganchoff, one of the last European-born “star” cantors working well into the late twentieth century. Rovner and Ganchoff are just two of many legendary figures with whom Schall had deep professional and personal connections.

In his instruction for novice cantors, Schall combines pedagogical knowledge of what a cantor must know in order to function in a professional pulpit position with an aesthetic orientation toward the sound and repertoires of the pre-World-War-II-recorded cantorial legacy. It is this combination of the promise of professionalization and access to the musical world of classic artists and old records that makes Schall an especially appealing teacher for Hasidic singers who aspire to become cantors. Schall offers cantorial revivalists a pedagogy that speaks to their aesthetic; the musical concept he teaches addresses the problems of making the transition between being an interpreter of golden age recorded recitatives and attaining competency in the performance of the full liturgical cycle of synagogue prayer-leading. In this chapter I will explore how the musical ambitions of Hasidic cantorial revivalists intersect with the ideologies of the professional cantorate. Schall’s educational offerings help revivalists to negotiate a musical identity for themselves as both artists dedicated to a highly specific aesthetic and cantors who must integrate into a set of professional norms.

THE PROBLEM OF LEARNING

As I discussed in chapter 1, classic cantorial recordings provide the form and substance of the Hasidic cantorial scene, offering aspiring singers a repertoire and a model of idiomatic vocal techniques to be studied and emulated. Being able to sing a recitative learned from a classic record, however, does not involve the same skills as being able to lead a prayer service in cantorial style. To achieve the knowledge required of a pulpit cantor, some manner of formal education is usually required. Each of the cantors I worked with in this study addressed the problem of learning in his own way, putting together a curriculum from a variety of sources, usually including some formal classes, private instruction, and online resources.

Cantorial training involves both a practical issue of how to learn and an ideological question of how to decide which kinds of music are valuable. While the aesthetics of early recordings may be the force behind forming an affective connection to khazones for many Hasidic cantorial revivalists, the need driving cantorial education is synagogue employment. Aspiring cantors need to figure out how to attain skills that will make them appear to synagogue hiring committees as knowledgeable, competent, and worthy of employment. There is a specific body of

knowledge that confers professional status on a cantor in the synagogue marketplace. The goal of this chapter is to elucidate what constitutes professional cantorial knowledge and to discuss how Hasidic cantorial revivalists go about achieving this knowledge.

The process of attaining professional cantorial knowledge inevitably involves obscuring other musical possibilities. Professional cantorial knowledge has been regulated by cantorial unions and educational institutions since the mid-twentieth century. The goal of these institutions was to streamline the heterogeneous body of multiple Ashkenazi liturgical traditions into a consistent body of music. The resultant set of professional musical practices has had the effect of foreshortening the internal diversity of Jewish liturgical sound in favor of musical expression characterized by consistency, coherence, and regulation by institutionally authorized texts. For Hasidic Jews who were enculturated in a ritual practice not led by the professional cantorate and who have immersed themselves in early twentieth-century cantorial styles, attaining professional cantorial knowledge is a special problem. For these singers, professionalization may involve disenchantment from the fantasy of reinhabiting “star” cantorial identities and aesthetic achievements.

The twentieth century saw a shift in the education of Eastern European Ashkenazi cantors from an apprenticeship model to training in accreditation-granting seminary conservatories in the post-World-War-II period.³ In the biographies of early twentieth-century cantors and other Jewish musicians (especially Yiddish theater performers), a picture emerges of an apprenticeship system for learning to be a cantor. Young boys, often from impoverished economic backgrounds, would be farmed out as live-in choral accompanists to cantors at a young age, becoming a *meshoyrer* (Yiddish, cantorial choir singer; plural *meshoyrerim*). Meshoyrerim would learn the cantorial repertoire over a period of years while serving in a professional capacity, a classic example of what education theorist Jean Lave calls legitimate peripheral participation, or learning through labor.⁴ Some practices reminiscent of the meshoyrer system were found in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century and choir singing continues to play a small role in cantorial culture. However, the apprenticeship model of learning mostly disappeared in the aftermath of World War I. The reproduction of cantorial culture was radically disrupted by the dismantling of rural and small-town Jewish life that occurred after the establishment of the Soviet Union, and later the destruction of Jewish European life in the Holocaust.⁵

In the early decades of the twentieth century, most cantors working in the United States were European-born and had learned their trade through the meshoyrer system or from elder relatives.⁶ In the years after the immigration restriction of 1924, the cantorial market had more room for American-born singers, creating a demand for new educational models. Cantorial training studios run by individual pedagogues seem to have emerged as an important style of cantorial education starting in the 1920s. Noah Schall was one such teacher, an exception in that he was

born in the United States. Other cantorial pedagogues included Louis Lipitz and Shimon Raisen, men who were born in the late nineteenth century in Russia and who had worked as cantors in Europe and the United States.⁷ Their pedagogy consisted in part of writing the entire liturgical cycle, adapted to the particular vocal strengths of their voices, for each of their students by hand.

Dyadic lessons created a context in which a teacher could work with a student one-on-one to help them master subtleties of timbre, ornament, and expression that would allow an American-born singer to develop a convincingly “cantorial” vocal approach, from the perspective of an Eastern European-born cantor. Given the centrality of written music for cantors who had not trained as choir singers, gradually being enculturated in the norms of cantorial performance, learning to interpret scores with the appropriate forms of phrasing and ornament took on a special importance. American-born cantors who were trained in this style include Leibele Waldman, Charles Bloch, Sydney Shicoff, and my grandfather, Jacob Konigsberg.⁸

The crisis of continuity posed by the horrors of the Holocaust brought into sharp focus what had long been a goal of the cantorial community: the establishment of a seminary-based conservatory training. In the decade after World War II, the three main denominations of Judaism in America launched cantorial schools at their flagship institutions: the School of Sacred Music at the Reform Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1948 (now the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music), the Cantors Institute at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary in 1951 (now the H. L. Miller Cantorial School), and the Cantorial Training Institute at the Orthodox Yeshiva University in 1954 (now the Belz School of Jewish Music). These three schools are still in operation today, although JTS has only five cantors enrolled in its 2022 cantorial class.⁹ When it was first established, the School of Sacred Music at HUC-JIR was intended to be a training program for Jews from Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox communities. Its primary prayer music curriculum is an anthology of prayer melodies composed by Cantor Adolph Katchko that is broadly praised for its beauty and rich idiomatic reflection of cantorial traditions. The Katchko anthology has had an outsized impact on the sound of American synagogue prayer music in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰

Despite the prestigious pedigree within the cantorial community of some of its founders and principal teachers, it would be deeply taboo for a Hasidic man to study at the Reform seminary or at JTS. Some of the Hasidic cantorial revivalists I spoke to were aware of the cantorial school at HUC, spoke admiringly of their curriculum, and are fans of Cantor Jackie Mendelson, one of the senior educators there. The preservation of older forms of cantorial music is a central theme in Mendelson’s public persona both as a teacher and as a stage and screen performer. Yet none of the aspiring Hasidic cantors would consider enrolling there. This leaves the Belz School of Jewish Music at YU as the only option for institutional cantorial training open to Hasidic singers. At the time of this writing in 2022, there are no institutions for the study of liturgical music in the Hasidic community.

YU serves as an institution where Hasidic cantorial revivalists can study professional cantorial repertoires, but the school itself represents a form of Orthodox Judaism that is distinct from the norms and lifeways of the Hasidic community. Modern Orthodoxy seeks to adhere to traditional conceptions of Jewish ritual practice based in *halakhah* (Hebrew, religious law) while simultaneously making room for Jewish people to interact with the “modern” non-Jewish world in their professional lives and some aspects of their social experience. For Hasidic Jews, Modern Orthodox Judaism acts as a middle ground that allows them to interact with aspects of the non-Jewish world. For some areas of study related to professional life, Hasidic Jews may find it expedient to study in institutions such as YU. It is worth emphasizing here that khazones is among the “worldly” areas of learning that Hasidic Jews must look outside their birth community to access.

The Belz School of Jewish Music at YU offers a similar form of pedagogy to HUC and JTS, emphasizing a version of prayer melodies that was standardized in the mid-twentieth century and that positions knowledge of this musical tradition as definitive for cantorial competence.¹¹ However, the Belz School is not aligned with a cantorial union that offers employment assistance to its members, as do its Conservative and Reform counterparts. Studying cantorial arts at the Belz School does not function as a conduit to employment. This is because few Orthodox synagogues today employ a professional cantor. In part because the school does not hold out a goal of professionalization for its students, the training offered at the Belz School is far less comprehensive than what is offered at the liberal movement cantorial seminaries. The Hasidic cantorial revivalists I spoke to who had taken classes at YU appreciated the experience, but they were aware of the limitations of the program, seeing it as one of a number of avenues to pursue rather than a final destination in their training. Aryeh Leib Hurwitz, a cantor who was born and raised in the Crown Heights Lubavitch community, described the Belz School as offering basic musical training in piano and music theory, which he valued highly, but its classes on prayer leading were “more like a *farbrengen* [Yiddish, social gathering] about khazones. It was more talking about it, discussing it.” To attain his desired level of cantorial competency Hurwitz sought training from a variety of sources:

I started off with some basic recordings of different cantors that just recorded the basic *nusakh* [i.e., commercially released instructional CDs of prayer melodies]. There’s one by Dovid Horowitz, Eli Lipsker, and Yossel Weinberg, and Mottel Berkowitz. Those are the four I learnt, and I kind of used a mix of all of them. Eventually I got a little more complex listening to Moshe Ganchoff [1905–97]. There’s also, Yankel [Jacob] Koussevitzky [1903–59]. So, he has live davenings [i.e., bootleg recordings of actual prayer services] which are very educational because his davenings, they’re not so cantorial, he’s more of a bal tefile, but they’re beautiful and they’re simple and they’re *nusakh*. And it’s easy to follow. It just gives you good ideas . . . I was the khazn for this program named Destinations [a Chabad outreach program], that was the

name of the program. By them everything is in Ashkenaz [meaning “mainstream” non-Hasidic prayer texts, not the variant used by Hasidic Jews]. So, I had to learn Ashkenaz as well. For that I used Rabbi Lichtenstein, his stuff online. Sometimes it gets confusing because I’m used to one way and now you have to do something different . . . I’m glad I did, because now my repertoire is much broader. (Aryeh Leib Hurwitz, interview June 27, 2018)

In this statement describing his education, Aryeh Leib Hurwitz uses the word *nusakh*, a shortened version of the phrase *nusakh hatefilah* (Hebrew, the manner of prayer), to refer to the musical performance of prayer texts. *Nusakh* is used as a term in cantorial discourse to describe the body of melodies and modalities for the chanting of prayers. Online sources were the most prominent part of Hurwitz’s training in *nusakh*. His learning ecology included Hasidic and other Orthodox Jewish prayer leaders who have made instructional albums to teach prayer melodies, as well as bootlegs of golden age cantors recorded during actual prayer services as opposed to commercial records of performance pieces decontextualized from ritual. He also makes mention of the differences in prayer texts between Hasidic and non-Hasidic Ashkenazi Jews, an important piece of liturgical code-switching that must be studied in order to move fluidly between different Orthodox Jewish communities. Finally, Hurwitz references how he put these resources to use in a modest cantorial job that served as a practicum where he could test his knowledge and develop his skill in the context of labor, the ultimate goal of his self-directed curriculum.

CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF NUSAKH

In an oft-repeated cantorial truism, it is said that a knowledgeable Jew should be able to walk into a synagogue and know the time of day (morning, afternoon, or night), the time of week (whether it be Sabbath or weekday), and the season of the year (according to the seasonal festival being observed) simply from the melodies being sung. An association of time with sound, represented by a set repertoire of melodies and modalities for the different prayer services, is a cornerstone of cantorial professional knowledge. Training in the melodic forms for the different services is one of the key concerns of cantorial pedagogy.

Cantors place great stock in the conception of there being a *correct* *nusakh* for each element of the liturgy. How the ideology of *nusakh* functions, and how Hasidic cantorial revivalists interact with this ideology, are the subjects of this section. The conception of *nusakh* currently adhered to by seminary-trained cantors emerged in the mid-twentieth century and was constructed by an American cantorate concerned with standardizing professional knowledge and institutionalizing the trade. The professional cantorial *nusakh* is a distinctive body of music, characterized by its privileging of textual sources over aurality as the basis for

defining correct performance. Cantorial nusakh is stylistically distinct from the forms of prayer sound heard on old liturgical records, as well as from the prayer music of the Hasidic community.

For Hasidic singers who are interested in gramophone-era cantorial music and who were enculturated in localized Hasidic prayer practices, learning the body of professional cantorial prayer-leading melodies is a challenge. Learning cantorial nusakh is a required step on the path from being an interpreter of old recorded cantorial recitatives to a musical expert with the requisite knowledge to qualify for synagogue employment outside the Hasidic community. Working outside their birth community is the only option for Hasidic cantorial revivalists seeking to professionalize because Hasidic synagogues as a rule do not hire professional cantors.

The term *nusakh* has a textual origin. Before being adopted to describe synagogue music, the word “nusakh” was used in the context of discussions of liturgy to connote variations in texts used for the statutory prayer services, usually based in community affiliation and geographic origin. Within the world of Eastern Europe Jews, *nusakh Ashkenaz* and *nusakh Sefard* commonly refer to the division between the “standard” prayer text used by European Jews that was mostly fixed by the seventeenth century, called the Ashkenaz liturgy, and the variant embraced by Hasidic Jews in the eighteenth century, influenced by the Kabbalistic rabbis of Safed, in Palestine. In a confusing terminological palimpsest, although the Hasidic liturgy is called *Sefard*, in reference to Sephardic Kabbalists, this liturgical variant is distinct from the version of the prayer book that is used by Sephardic Jews (i.e., the Jews with roots in the Iberian Peninsula, exiled during the Inquisition in the fifteenth century, and later taking up residence across the Mediterranean world and in other international diasporic locations).

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the cantorate entered a period of modernization, with cantors who worked in urban metropolises creating new repertoires of synagogue music that would reflect the changing political status of Jews on the cusp of emancipation and the aspirations of Jews to participate in the social and economic life of their non-Jewish neighbors. The new synagogue music, epitomized by the work of Viennese cantor and composer Salomon Sulzer (1804–90), was characterized by a Romantic choral style that reflected the musical trends of Western art music and church hymns. To reflect the difference between new and old repertoires, a variety of terms came into use to describe the musical traditions used for chanting prayers that predated the new compositional styles. Yiddish terms such as *skarbove* (sacred), *gust* (mode), and *ur alte* (ancient) circulated in essays written by cantors and as instructions on the pages of cantorial music anthologies to describe what was understood to be an older Jewish music of prayer.¹²

The nineteenth century saw an explosion of cantorial publication, embracing both new compositions of synagogue music and transcriptions of older prayer melodies, often in the same volume of the personal repertoire of a specific

cantor. In 1859, Hirsch Weintraub (1811–1881) published *Schire beth Adonai*, a three-volume anthology of his music.¹³ The first two volumes contained his personal compositions in the contemporary choral style, while the third volume was devoted to the music of his father Solomon Weintraub (1781–1829), a legendary figure in Polish-Jewish music.¹⁴ The transcriptions of this older body of music document a highly florid, nonmetered melismatic vocal style that foreshadows the sound of gramophone-era cantors. It is stylistically distinct from the “rational” art music approach to choral cantorial composition of the period. One of the best-known cantorial anthologies, Abraham Baer’s *Baal t’fillah oder Der praktische Vorbeter*, published in Gothenburg in 1877, is notable for including multiple musical variants for the same element of the prayer texts, labeling some melodies as stemming from Polish or German traditions. Baer’s pioneering work indicates an awareness that musical traditions of Jewish prayer were multiple and contingent upon regional stylistic variations.¹⁵ These are just a few of the better-known examples that established the field of published Jewish liturgical music and laid the foundation for the standardization and professionalization of cantorial practice that was achieved in a more consistent form in the twentieth century.

In the context of the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews to the United States (ca. 1880–1924), some cantors were able to establish themselves as star performers, mirroring developments in the major metropolises of Europe. Cantors created identities as popular performers in concert, on record, and sometimes in films. The stylistic trappings of star performance were also heard in the synagogue. Cantors leveraged the format of the lengthy Sabbath morning and holiday services as sacred concerts that would feature a potpourri of styles and approaches, including nineteenth-century choral repertoire, as well as the partly improvised virtuoso recitative, an emotional focal point of prayer leading that was valued for its ability to elicit tears from the listening congregation.¹⁶ Having a unique and affecting repertoire for prayer leading was a requirement for cantors who were in competition for a limited number of positions. A culture of competition and athletic vocal talent was ascendant in the American cantorial scene of the 1920s, the period of the cantorate most represented on commercial records.¹⁷ Despite their innovative musical approaches and public profiles as composers, cantors seem to have been valued in part because they were understood to represent a connection to the Jewish past. To an extent, cantors seem to have shared a commonly held body of prayer melodies for key elements of the liturgy, albeit in variants reflecting regionalisms and creative license.¹⁸

The term *nusakh* was used by cantors writing in Yiddish to connote musical traditions at least as early as the 1930s but was brought into its current prevalent use as a musical term by cantors in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁹ The term is associated with the work of Abraham Binder (1895–1966), a key Jewish musical ideologue and one of the founders of the School of Sacred Music at HUC. The frequent use of the term *nusakh* in publications and in pedagogical materials

for cantors helped establish the sense of an intellectual lineage that would cement the connection of brand-new repertoires and institutions to the European heritage and the “timelessness” of Jewish prayer music. At the same time, the music of Binder and other mid-twentieth-century Jewish synagogue composers sought to establish boundaries of taste and decorum that would map onto the aspirations for dignity and middle-class identity that were key elements in the developing Jewish community.²⁰

Working in opposition to the heterogeneity and flamboyance of the star cantors and their focus on individualistic approaches to prayer leading, the cantorial training programs founded after World War II focused on training singers who would be knowledgeable in a uniform body of prayer music. Professional cantors were to be responsible for upholding a recognizable musical tradition. Their prayers would be expected to adhere to an ideal of decorum in the synagogue.²¹ Pulpit cantors would perform a body of prayer music that fit with the emerging status of Jews as middle-class participants in American life. The cantorial training programs were helmed by cantors such as Binder and Israel Goldfarb who sought to establish an approach to prayer music that would meet the needs of the changing Ashkenazi Jewish populace that was increasingly confident in its “American” identity and less attracted to or familiar with the sounds and language of their European-born parents’ generation.

The founders of the Cantors Assembly (CA), established in 1947 as a union for cantors in the Conservative movement, rejected the figure of the star cantor and the dramatic virtuoso style of the immigrant era.²² In exchange for the instability of the charisma-based approach of the cantorial market in its early period, the CA successfully advocated to institutionalize salary norms and job placement for cantors in the growth market of suburban synagogues. The golden age cantorial style, while still extolled for its beauty and authenticity, was castigated as a relic of the past, even as key figures in the style were still living and enjoying successful careers. Instead of the stylistic heterogeneity of cantors in the immigrant era, nusakh was presented as a body of musical knowledge that would represent the Jewish past in a purified form.

At a 1951 Cantors Assembly convention in New York, Cantor Merrill Fisher offered an opinion that was perhaps representative of professional cantorial discourse: “It behooves us to offer the most noble and inspiring music in our services. We cannot condone the usage of secular tunes and shades of operatic arias in our services. Let us sing only the tunes that are indigenous to our people, i.e. the nusach.”²³ Fisher was one voice in the movement to frame nusakh as a system that could be distilled into a singular body of musical knowledge. This rational approach to prayer music was well-suited as the foundation for curriculum, standardized knowledge that could be assessed, and the basis for a professional labor force.

The first generation of cantors trained in the cantorial seminary schools were the children of the immigrant generation; their aesthetics resonated with the styles

of European cantors and their competence was usually expected to include idiomatic vocal approaches consistent with the practices of the gramophone era style. In the second generation, a shift was in progress toward musical scores as the paradigmatic source of prayer knowledge. Musicologist Boaz Tarsi has described the Katchko anthology, used as a standard curricular material at HUC, as constituting a “nusakh America” because of the prevalence of its melodies in synagogue practice. Mark Slobin’s fieldwork with cantors in the 1980s shows consistency in the nusakh “improvisations” of cantors, revealing the stamp of conservatory training in creating a uniform approach to prayer chant. In his ethnography conducted at the School of Sacred Music at HUC in the early 2000s, Judah Cohen found slippage back into the textual meaning of the term *nusakh*, with some students identifying the term completely with mid-century cantorial anthologies they learned from.²⁴

Noah Schall teaches his own unique conception of nusakh that encompasses a body of melodies and a motivic approach to improvisation. His style represents an ornate and sophisticated variant of the music taught in cantorial conservatories and adhered to by most professional cantors. In its attention to detail, variation, and differentiation of the melodic structure for each of the different prayer services, Schall’s approach is exemplary of the ideology of nusakh—it is an arcane body of knowledge that requires professional skill to execute. The work he has produced is recognized and revered by a broad range of cantors and is held up as a marker of authenticity. Schall himself is often invoked by his students as a totem to prove their connection to tradition.²⁵

Schall’s work is one node in a lineage of cantors seeking to establish and stabilize a *cultural memory* of Jewish music. Cultural memory, a term associated with historians Jan and Aleida Assman, refers to the ways in which publicly held knowledge is structured through texts, monuments, and institutionalized practices. Canons and traditions are established by authorities, conferring validity on hierarchical social structures that control access to central texts and their interpretation.²⁶ Like Maurice Halbwachs’s “collective memory,” or Erving Goffman’s “frames” for the analysis of behavior, the concept of cultural memory suggests a method for exploring the ways in which knowledge is structured by texts and social norms. Cultural memory offers a framework for attending to the ways in which tradition is shaped by authority.²⁷ The successful establishment of a cultural memory simultaneously preserves and destroys. It codifies elements of tradition, and it excludes others, in the process conferring authority on experts in the realms of officially legitimated fields of knowledge.

In post-World War II United States, the cantorate organized to control memory by creating textbook anthologies for the training of cantors in seminary conservatories. Learning the codified form of Jewish sacred music taught in cantorial schools and graduating as an accredited cantor was a mandatory step for employment in the expanding market of Conservative and Reform synagogues, further

consolidating the legitimating power of institutions. Foundational figures in the establishment of the American postwar cantorate, such as Goldfarb and Binder, worked to shape the cultural memory of Jewish Americans. Their vision of Jewish liturgical music largely bypassed the efflorescence of cantorial creativity during the period of mediatization and popularization of cantors in the first half of the century.

The postwar cantorate focused on honing a consistent standard of competence in leading prayer services (rather than developing the flamboyant, virtuoso soloist approach), cultivating new liturgical song traditions (with an emphasis on metered melodies that could be sung by congregation members in unison), and commissioning new music for the synagogue (typically in prestigious classical music styles but sometimes embracing jazz sounds, an area of innovation that had a long-term impact of opening the synagogue to the influence of American popular music).²⁸ These priorities reflected assumptions on the part of rabbis and cantorial institutional leaders about acculturated congregation members who were imagined to be less knowledgeable about Jewish religious traditions and uninterested in the immigrant culture of Yiddish-speaking Jews.²⁹

Noah Schall fits jaggedly into the postwar scene of cantorial pedagogy because his work is committed to two closely related but fundamentally different legacies: the golden age of khazones and the ideology of nusakh. He is the product of a cantorial family and a community-based music scene that privileged competition, creativity, and a rarified aesthetic concept in cantorial soloist prayer leading. Like other cantors of his generation, Schall seeks to represent a truth about the Jewish collective, filtered through the imagined ethnographic reportage of his own creativity. However, unlike in the realm of cantorial records and star performance careers that were based in the creativity of individual stylists, the ideology of nusakh is predicated on ideals of anonymity and fidelity—a conception of cultural memory that is validated by texts and regulated by institutions. In its post-Holocaust iteration, cantorial knowledge is not supposed to be created; instead, it is figured as a form of preservation and its ethical valence is based in claims to tradition. In discussions of nusakh, cantors use terms like *real*, *authentic*, and *correct* to describe their knowledge rather than foregrounding their agentic creativity.

My purpose in this discussion is not to question the authenticity of the nusakh taught in cantorial seminaries, or the highly personal version of nusakh that Schall teaches his students. Rather, I am seeking to draw attention to the constructed category of authenticity in regard to Jewish prayer sound. Two centuries of cantorial anthologies, commercial recordings of cantors, and newly released field recordings of prayer leaders made in the Pale of Settlement in 1912–14³⁰ all attest to the heterogeneity of prayer sounds and melodic forms employed across the realm of Ashkenazi sacred music.³¹ Whether the nusakh taught by post-World War II cantors is “real” or “invented” is an emotionally fraught question; the categories of *real* and *invented* have an ethical import related to the cantorial imperative toward

memory. Cantors are deeply invested in the idea that contemporary understandings of nusakh are a form of fidelity to the lifeways of pre-Holocaust European Jews. Critical analysis of the sources of nusakh seems to be in tension with the faith and investment in the reality of nusakh that is demanded of cantors by their educational processes.

In multiple discussions with cantors across a variety of generational cohorts and professional communities, I have been consistently surprised by the lack of knowledge about the provenance of their musical corpus. Anecdotally, cantors seem to be broadly accepting of the idea that the prayer music they call nusakh is a musical tradition with a lineage stretching into the anonymous folkloric past. With a few significant exceptions, published works that offer a theoretical analysis of synagogue “prayer modes” in general take cantorial anthologies at face value as a neutral source of traditional knowledge, rather than critically engaging their contexts and ideologies.³² The work of analyzing how and why mid-century cantors made the decisions they did in constructing the body of professional nusakh has been indefinitely deferred. The reticence to train a critical lens on the concept of nusakh seems to stem in part from the sedimented norms of cantorial culture and its claims to authentically access a singular truth. The idea of a singular “correct” nusakh for prayer recitation is clearly ahistorical. Yet this conception has a staying power because of its usefulness as the source of both a coherent musical language and a professional identity.

Schall follows the trend in American cantorial pedagogy and effaces his role as composer in his presentation of nusakh to his students. In an inversion of the Romantic conception of heroic creativity as a source of spiritual and aesthetic authority, for cantorial educators, impartiality as a conduit of tradition is upheld as an ideal. The erudite cantorial expert, in this post-Holocaust paradigm, is a kind of empty vessel, transmitting a sacred knowledge that has its basis in the anonymous past or in the achievements of the legendary cantors of Eastern Europe. This personified anonymity, in which the creative individual subsumes their identity into a folkloric anonymity, is perhaps influenced by rabbinic tendencies toward pseudopigraphy. In numerous classic rabbinic texts, authorial voice is ventriloquized through the figure of a revered figure in the past; in some cases, innovative religious thought is ascribed to hidden traditions that are revealed through the intercession of an angel or spirit.³³ In cantorial education, appeals to cultural memory, rather than individual artistry, are a technique for creating a sense of continuity.

For Hasidic singers who are interested in becoming cantors, accessing the professional knowledge of cantorial nusakh is a pressing concern. Learning the professional cantorial nusakh can present additional challenges for Hasidic Jews because the cantorial version of the prayer melodies is distinct from what is sung in most Hasidic synagogues. Many of the basic musical structures are different from what would be heard sung by a bal tefile in Hasidic contexts. Finding resources to learn the melodies is an initial challenge; figuring out how to integrate cantorial nusakh

with the sounds of khazones learned from old records poses an additional problem that is unique to a revivalist musical orientation. Toward this goal of professionalization *and* integration of stylistic elements of the gramophone-era cantors into prayer leading, some Hasidic cantorial revivalists turn to Noah Schall.

THE CANTORIAL TRAINING STUDIO
AND THE LEARNING ECOLOGY OF HASIDIC
CANTORIAL REVIVALISTS

Noah Schall provides a powerful resource for unlocking the professional and aesthetic goals of Hasidic cantorial revivalists. Schall is a maverick figure who works with Jewish liturgical musicians across denominational lines—while he himself identifies as Orthodox, his students are drawn from multiple communities. His long career and his vaunted musical gifts help him transcend denominationalism to achieve a near universal status as a revered teacher of nusakh.

Schall's tutelage aligns with the goals of Hasidic aspiring cantors along three primary lines:

1. Schall is a universally acknowledged expert in nusakh; the pedigree of being his student, while not bearing the practical significance of a seminary diploma, holds a certain prestige and mystique. What he teaches is recognizable as an authentic representation of tradition to synagogue cantor-hiring committees, which tend to be made up of members of a given community with the most conservative conception of "correct nusakh."
2. Schall teaches a version of nusakh that resonates stylistically with the sounds of golden age cantorial records. His pedagogy embraces a conception of nusakh that is linked to improvisation, creativity, and sensitivity to the multiple forms of Ashkenazi Jewish liturgical music tradition stemming from different geographic, historic, and social conditions. His music emphasizes vocal coloratura and ornament, signatory aspects of phonograph-era khazones that characterize the historically informed performance practices of Hasidic cantorial revivalists.
3. Beyond musical skill, Schall offers his students a socialization in the culture of cantorial music and the role of cantors in synagogue social life. Schall provides this aspect of cantorial education through storytelling, an element of his pedagogic approach that his students have noted to me and that I experienced in my lessons with him as well. Through anecdotes, scandalous gossip, and bracing analysis of the personalities of legendary figures in the music, Schall gives his students a window into how cantors related to their communities.

In what might appear a surprise to outside observers, the education Hasidic cantorial revivalists acquire from Schall in order to prepare for synagogue employment is strikingly similar to elements of the training of their peers at HUC-JIR, the

Reform seminary. Schall worked for many years at HUC and, in conversation with me, cited the Katchko anthologies as being a premiere source for nusakh. As is highlighted in Judah Cohen's ethnography of Reform cantorial training, storytelling and cantorial anecdotes are also key ingredients of the socialization of cantors in liberal movement training programs.³⁴

What sets the training of Hasidic cantorial revivalists apart from their Reform peers is its fragmentary and intermittent nature and reduced reliance on the skills of music reading. Hasidic cantorial revivalists typically do not read music, although many acquire a partial ability to read in the course of their burgeoning professional lives. Hasidic cantorial revivalists also differ from Reform cantorial students in a variety of cultural elements, some obvious and others more subtle, including their bilingualism in Yiddish, Orthodox yeshivah education, their enculturation into Hasidic prayer music, and, crucially, their focus on gramophone records as a primary focus of their creative lives and source for their conception of cantorial sound. While both Hasidic and Reform cantors train in the professional cantorial nusakh, the focus of Hasidic cantorial revivalists on listening to old records leads them to develop a set of cantorial vocal techniques rooted in the sound of early twentieth-century performance that distinguish them from cantors of their age cohort, even when they are singing the same musical material.

Noah Schall's private cantorial training studio has been a key element in the education of three of the participants in this study (Yanky Lemmer, Zevi Steiger, and David Babinet); two others studied with Schall indirectly by learning from his students (Shulem Lemmer was trained in part by his brother Yanky, and Aryeh Leib Hurwitz studied voice with David Babinet); and another cantor studied with Schall in preparation for a special service he led as a guest cantor at a prestigious synagogue (Zev Muller).

Toward the goal of elucidating the process of learning for Schall's Hasidic students, in this section I will offer a sketch of the *learning ecology* of two of his students, Yanky Lemmer and Zevi Steiger. The concept of the learning ecology takes into account multiple experiences that complement each other, analyzing education as a process that takes place in a variety of sites and social contexts that are not restricted to formal learning settings.³⁵ For Hasidic cantorial revivalists, the learning ecology must take into account family enculturation, the sonic world of Hasidic prayer houses, Orthodox pop, and cantorial records, among other sources. The self-consciously educational experiences of online learning resources, seminary classrooms, and private lessons are pivotal points of musical education, but they are informed by the entirety of the ecology of sound, music, language, and religious education that have occurred over the course of the learner's life.

Yanky Lemmer's biographical outline is already familiar to the reader from interlude A: he began his cantorial soloist career with a concert performance in 2007 at Young Israel Beth El, a synagogue in Borough Park, Brooklyn, where he

was a singer in the choir of Cantor Benzion Miller. Lemmer points to a YouTube video he posted of him singing at this concert as the starting point in building a star reputation that resulted in invitations to sing in concerts and lead services at prestigious synagogues.

I sang one piece, it went up on YouTube and all of a sudden, I get these requests, gigs here, gigs there and I was so not ready for it. So, I keep saying this, my career grew much faster than my education . . . It's good and bad at the same time.

Lemmer took classes at the Belz School and was directed by instructors there to the cantorial training studio of Noah Schall.

I called Noyakh [Yiddish, Noah] Schall. I want to learn some nusakh. [*Imitating Noah's voice*] *What do you need it for?* 'Cause I want to learn some khazones. *It's dead!* [*Chuckles.*] That's Noyakh, you know. But I was persistent. I said, it might be dead, but I want to go hang out with the dead. Fine [*laughs*].

Lemmer described his classes as lengthy experiences, heavy on conversation.

It was a lot of *schmoozing* [Yinglish, chatting]. I won't sugar coat that in any way, but that's part of the learning process in my opinion. It's like he had seven hundred anecdotes of every khazn that you have to know before you know the piece. And he would tell you about all of these quirks of the khazanim of the golden age. And it was very interesting. But then he would say, "OK here's a sheet. Let me write out the Dorian mode for you. OK practice that."

Lemmer's training was cushioned in the sociality of conversations about cantors, delivered in Schall's characteristic unsanctimonious style. He came to Schall with a bifurcated profile as a musician, lacking many basic musical skills, but extremely advanced in his knowledge of cantorial performance repertoire and vocal techniques he had learnt from old records. Conversation functioned, perhaps, as an enticement, offering a view into the world that the fledgling cantor could access through the more laborious aspects of learning, like scale singing.

Listening to Lemmer's prayer leading in synagogue, I could recognize characteristics of Schall's style. One significant example is the use of preparatory motifs in what cantors refer to as "*freygish*," a Yiddish variant on the musical term Phrygian, used to describe a major-sounding pitch group with a characteristic augmented second interval. Schall emphasizes a style of florid mode mixing in the area of the fifth below the tonic, an area of motivic variation heard in some of the best-known cantorial records, such as the opening of Yossele Rosenblatt's *Hinenee heone* (1926) or Israel Schorr's *Yehi Rotzon Sheyibone Beis-Hamikdosh* (1927). I have heard Lemmer and other Schall students use this type of phrase as the basis for brilliant vocal effects in their prayer leading. Emphasizing exquisite, detailed motifs that ornament and punctuate the prayer melodies allows Schall's students to engage their special cantorial techniques of coloratura, ornament, and distinctive timbre sequence. Schall's personal vocabulary of musical elements offer Hasidic cantorial

revivalists ideas about how to interpolate riffs and ideas they already have at the ready from their study of old records into their performance of the professional nusakh.

Zevi Steiger, another of Schall's students, was born and raised in the Hasidic community of Antwerp. Although his family was Lubavitch, because of the small and tight-knit nature of the Hasidic community there, he grew up familiar with the prayer customs of numerous Hasidic sects. He and his father also occasionally visited the Great Synagogue, where Cantor Benjamin Muller presided over services. Steiger briefly took lessons with Cantor Muller to learn a cantorial recitative, Yossele Rosenblatt's *Tal* (1923), as a performance piece to sing at his older brother's bar mitzvah. As a teenager, Steiger became a devotee of classic cantorial records. He spent numerous years studying and later working in international Lubavitch yeshivahs, including periods in England, France, and South Africa, before settling in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the center of the Lubavitch world. Throughout his yeshivah years, Steiger found small cohorts of friends who shared his interest in khazones with whom he would listen and who he would perform for in an informal manner. Steiger and a friend began visiting Schall together after hearing about him from an older Lubavitch cantor, Levi Kaplan. Steiger found Schall at first to be discouraging.

I would look a lot for approval from him. I would want him to say, you have a great voice, you should go into this. But he was very pessimistic about khazones. In general, he wasn't a guy who was into compliments . . . He was like, you want to get better this is what you do. He didn't take me as serious at first. He was like, what do you need me for? Go to Moshe Teleshevsky [*laughs*]. He said that to me . . .

As noted in chapter 1, Moshe Teleshevsky (1927–2012) was perhaps the best-known cantor in the Brooklyn Lubavitch community; Schall was denigrating him as a representative of the putatively simpler approach to prayer music.³⁶ Schall seems to have been trying to discourage Steiger by suggesting to him that he stay within the musical parameters of his community rather than trying to master the more technically challenging and, from Schall's perspective, more aesthetically advanced style of khazones.

Schall demanded that Steiger abandon the melodies he learned in prayer contexts throughout his life and build a new musical basis for prayer leading.

Then you can learn how to improvise, but if you don't have a base . . . this was like two years into my studies with him [*laughs*]. *You don't have a base. You don't even know nusakh.* He kind of thought, which is kind of true, I'm just parroting, I'm just copying what I heard as a child, and I didn't really understand it [*cantorial nusakh*].

Ultimately, Schall did teach Steiger skills relating to ornamentation and variation.

He asked me to say *Shokhein ad* [the beginning of the *Shakhris* Sabbath morning service], so I did a *Shokhein ad*, I did the whole thing. And he basically went through an

entire *Shakhris*. It sounded basic, but it's not basic. And then we learned to embellish a little bit. My basis is on that, pretty much every week.

Throughout the years when Steiger was studying with Schall, he was employed as a cantor at the Southampton Jewish Center, a Chabad house in an affluent area on Long Island. Through connections in his community, Steiger met a rabbi with an affinity for cantorial music who hired him as a regular cantor to lead services every Shabbos. This is an unusual arrangement for a Chabad house and it provided Steiger with a practicum enabling to put his lessons with Schall into practice in the context of labor. Such situations are an element of education that are of great value to novice cantors but are extremely difficult to find. In his prayer leading at Southampton, Steiger employs melodic variations, ornamentation, and coloratura in his execution of the nusakh melodies, in a manner that is characteristic of Schall's style.

STORYTELLING AS CULTURAL PEDAGOGY

Noah Schall's stories communicate intangible cultural knowledge about what it is like to be a cantor, or what it was like in previous generations. His stories frequently focus on the eccentricities of cantors and how their outsider behaviors emerged in moments of friction with the broader Jewish community, often with a comic or satiric intent that ridiculed the sanctimony of Jewish community leaders, or the outrageous "star" personas of the cantors, or both. A sampling of anecdotes from my conversations with him included:

1. A story about the sexual profligacy of Mordechai Hershman (1888–1940), a cantor with an international performance career and one of the key recording stars of the gramophone era. Once, when Hershman was interviewing for a cantorial position, he went to visit the community's rabbi in his bedroom. The rabbi was ill at the time and was lying in bed. Hershman introduced himself with one name, assuming the rabbi would know all about him. The rabbi did indeed know about him but was focused on his reputation as an irreverent rule-breaker rather than his music. "Oh, it's Hershman, we can't have him." The punch line of the story is Hershman saying, "It's the first time anyone ever said 'no' to me in bed."
2. An anecdote about a visit Schall payed to the famed Samuel Malavsky (1894–1983), in his later years. Malavsky was a protégé of Yossele Rosenblatt and the leader of a family choir that became one of the most popular acts in Jewish American music in the 1950s. In his later years, Malavsky became alienated from Judaism because of his anger over the disrespect that had been directed at his daughters, especially Goldie Malavsky, a brilliant cantor whom he had groomed as his successor but who could not gain employment

as a cantor because of the gender rules of the synagogue. Malavsky would no longer go to pray in a synagogue. Schall asked Malavsky, “But how do you say *Kadish* [the mourner’s prayer]?” Malavsky pointed to a small pond near his house and answered, “I say *Kadish* with the ducks.”

3. A story about Leib Glantz (1898–1964), a major recording star and an ideologue who wrote extensively about Jewish music, leading a service at a synagogue on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A packed synagogue awaited the star cantor. Glantz preceded the service with a lecture on Jewish music, in which he made claims about the pentatonic scale being the basis for all Jewish music. After this unexpected start, Glantz launched into a version of the service that was so strange, so astringently modernist to the ears of the assembled Jews, who had clear expectations about what a cantorial prayer service would sound like, that the synagogue began to empty out. The punchline of the story is, “By the end of the service, they barely had a *minyán*” (the required minimum of ten needed to conduct a prayer service).

These stories share in common a perspective that accentuates cantors’ sensuality, outsider perspectives on spiritual life, and eccentric artistic behaviors. They humanize legendary figures whose records Schall’s students have spent countless hours poring over. With his anecdotes about the stars, Schall intimates to his students something about how cantors fit into their communities, or how they subverted communal norms. Cantors served as an emotional vector in the prayer life of the Jews, offering a desired experience that was of value in attracting people to the experience of prayer. As famous artists, some cantors were allowed a degree of nonconformity, in exchange, as it were, for the emotional labor they carried out on behalf of the community through the affecting powers of their music.

In addition to their beautiful singing, cantors brought some of the energy and enticement of art and performance into the synagogue, allowing Jews to experience their own parallel to the world of the concert hall or the opera. Cantors were entertainers, who brought qualities of excitement to the communities they served. Watching Yanky Lemmer at his job at Lincoln Square, I could see how he embodied some of these qualities of cantorial performance in his interactions with congregants. I noticed that when he was not leading the service, he could deftly switch from prayer leader to charming jokester. I observed Lemmer entertaining his boosters in the community with a light informality as they chatted in the hallways of the services during the parts of the service when he was “on break” (such as the Torah service when scripture is chanted by a member of the community other than the cantor).

During one gossipy conversation with congregants, Lemmer heard some voices in the sanctuary singing “*Siman tov umazel tov*,” a song performed at celebratory life cycle events, apparently in honor of a congregant. Lemmer immediately turned away from his interlocutors and rushed in to sing along and lend his prominent

voice so that all would hear the cantor elevating the celebration. One of the men in the chat circle that had formed around the cantor remarked, “He switched characters.” Lemmer pedals between his social role as a down-to-earth, charmingly antisancimonious comrade to his fans in the shul and his official capacity as the ritual functionary who drives the emotional experience of prayer. Yanky’s good humored style of behavior with his congregants points to the ways in which the “rule bending” of sanctimony may actually be a needed form of synagogue behavior that is part of the cantor’s social role. Social knowledge about how a cantor is supposed to act relates to the worldview of cantorial culture that Schall’s cantorial training studio imparts, connecting musical practice with a conception of what kind of a person a cantor can be in the social life of a synagogue.

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Schall’s attitude toward his talented young Hasidic students who are interested in khazones bears a degree of ambiguity. Over the course of his lifetime, Schall has watched interest and support for cantorial music wane in material ways that are unmistakable. His overarching sense about the genre is that it is a music without a future. The dedication of a subset of singers to khazones draws into question the single variable equation of the decline narrative shared by Schall and many elder cantors. If there are young performers who are dedicated to the craft, then the music will continue to resound in the present and beyond, even if it is unclear how the musical culture will transform in the absence of synagogue institutions to support it. Schall noted, with perhaps a degree of condescension, that a “Hasid has more chance of sounding like a cantor than an American boy,” seeming to draw into question the reality of Hasidic Jews as members of Jewish America, and the relevance of their work with khazones to American Jewish life. In conversations where I asked him about his Hasidic students, he did not seem to me to have reflected more deeply on what needs the music fulfills for them or what possibilities their work might open in the future.

Schall’s tutelage provides his students with skills they need to professionalize and gain employment. His version of nusakh adheres to the normative ideology promoted by the cantorial seminaries and is considered valuable by cantorial hiring committees in Modern Orthodox synagogues. His approach to nusakh provides a musical bridge to the sounds and repertoires of the golden age style while simultaneously providing immersion in the professional skill of cantorial nusakh. For Hasidic cantorial revivalists whose primary connection to cantorial music is through gramophone-era recordings, Schall’s pedagogy is especially suited to fostering a creative approach to prayer leading that mimics aspects of the concert-like prayer-leading style of cantors in the early to mid-twentieth century.

The stories Schall tells as part of his curriculum about the revered cantorial stars encourage his students to imagine themselves as connected to the social life of the music and to develop habits of synagogue sociality. As artists, a cantor’s

persona has a quality of doubleness. Cantors are expected, perhaps, to be able to code-switch between registers of piety and play in their bearing with congregants. Schall has successfully trained a handful of Hasidic students to be able to fulfill social and musical roles as pulpit cantors. The question remains as to whether or not there is room in the world of the contemporary American synagogue for the musical skill set these young cantors possess. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the opportunity to perform the role of cantor in the synagogue is rare; it requires cantorial revivalists to make a variety of aesthetic and personal compromises.