

Conclusion

Cantors and Their Ghosts

Hasidic cantorial revivalists are representatives of a methodology of research and creative response that has erupted into new life in the past decades, spurred perhaps by the immediacy of access to digitized archival sources. Animating the archive through performance and imaginative forms of research offers a response to a sense of the unnaturalness of the disciplinary divide between performance and the academic study of expressive culture.¹ The approach of the cantors, characterized by an embodied approach to sharing the fruits of archival research and leveraging historical artefacts as the basis for art practices, is shared in different forms across disciplines. Examples of this kind of research have arisen both in the academy and the creative arts, bearing a special appeal for performers and researchers working with the pre-Holocaust world of Ashkenazi musical culture. In this paradigm, research in the archive not only produces knowledge; it also creates new ways of being in the world.

For researchers engaged in creative styles of archival exploration, previously dormant texts, genres, and artistic voices that have been relegated to the immateriality of ghosts are reanimated. Vivid absences are brought into presence as the material to actively construct identities and styles of living. Meaning, as encountered through the artefacts the dead have left behind, is made in collaboration with the dead. These artefacts are chosen carefully, both for their historical significance and for their aesthetic qualities. The perception of value in archival sources is permeable to other forms of fascination, such as erotic desire or perceptions of kinship that bind together researchers and their archival interlocutors. The objects of research are magnetic. They act on the bodies and consciousness of their beholders, enlivening multiple modalities of aesthetics and cultural literacy, sparking ambitions in the researcher to be seen by the world the way they see the archive.

My own work of research is similarly motivated by a magnetic pull of sympathy and excitement—I am looking at artists who are looking at the archive; in the process, my understanding of the archival sources has been transformed. The activating substance that has worked on me and moved me toward a new approach to engaging with the history and sounds of the cantorial golden age is the musical talent and insights of the cantors I have been studying. With this project, I am writing against the idea that exploring the social contexts, histories and political meaning of music is in opposition to its pleasures and embodied experiences. Seeking to know the fullness of where the music has come from, looking closely at how it operates in the lives of musicians and their hearers—these are activities of scholarship that overlap with the experience that occurs in the act of listening.

Music operates in the seams between the senses. It elides and makes light work of the signs and symbols of sedimented cultural meanings. It draws us into deeper communion with a realm of ideas because we are bidden to know through the imperatives of the senses. It invigorates our perception of lineages and histories. The act of listening for me while conducting this research project has opened up histories and sensitized me to problems of learning and cognition.

Khazones is not valuable to young Hasidic singers because it is old, or because of its prestige, or because of an abstract sense of its historical significance. Conversance with the music does not figure as a mark of conventional virtue in the eyes of their birth community, nor does it grant a clear path to fame or employment. The music speaks to its impassioned lovers on its own terms, from a place of expressive power and ritual drama. Interpreting the meanings of the music is something the cantors must undertake on their own, without the scaffolding of institutions. The domain of the encounter with the past is located in old records and in the microcommunities that have gathered around them, in a world that is pointedly apart. The community of khazones revivalists and aficionados reenacts forms of fandom and embodied acts of appreciation of the music that were central to the success of the gramophone-era cantors. Hasidic cantorial revivalists today glean energy and direct their passions toward forms of sociality that were defined in a different time and cultural context and that resonate in a different but parallel form in the present.

Old records document something that cantors in the past had to say about their worlds. They tell a story about persistence of memory, transformations occurring in the context of urban modernity, and conceptions of collectivity shaped by the experiences of economic and political marginalization and state violence. The sound of khazones is inscribed into old records—it is both a sound of prayer and yet something else entirely, given a second skin by its materiality as a technology and a media object. It is akin to the sound of urban modernity, its timbral qualities a close relative to the loudspeaker at a political rally or the urban soundscape of street cars and foot traffic. Cantorial gramophone records offer testimony to the work of Jewish artists in moments when they were heightened in their ability to

speak about their lives, communities, and histories. This sound of commentary on the public experiences and inner life of the Jewish community has retained some of its visceral, transgressive pull on the ears of those who know to listen.

Hasidic cantorial revivalists are attuned to the sonic worlds of the music—their characteristic achievement is the transcription of the details of vocal production. Rejecting an approach to cantorial compositions as “pure” musical information or notation that can be detached from a historical performance style, Hasidic cantorial revivalists lean into techniques of embodied transcription. The genius of their style lies in the way the artists master anatomical details of vocal musculature and timbre control they have appropriated from mediated sources. These qualities evoke a physical presence, inviting the world of the gramophone-era cantors into the contemporary scene. Cantorial revival derives grit and substance from the physical strife of Jewish lives of the early twentieth century.

Khazones references a Jewish polyglossia—it is a musical style that speaks multiple languages, invoking the formal Hebrew liturgy, conceptions of the sublime that relate to European art music, the playfulness and flirtation with entertainment characteristic of mediated popular culture, socialist and collectivist political ideologies, and conceptions of the sacred referencing both the Hasidic milieu and the universalizing tendencies of Reform. The gramophone-era cantor’s skill lies in the ability to contain multiple worlds of Jewish sonic life within the musical voice of a single performer. Gramophone-era cantors famously were beloved by all strands of the Jewish collective—leftists and rabbis, men and women, Orthodox and secularists. Sounds of khazones were appropriated into Yiddish musicals, the symphonic works of elite Jewish classical composers, and vaudevillians, all of whom were seeking to capture the deep emotive associations of the genre and its ability to paint a picture of Jewish history and community.

Khazones, as described in archival Yiddish press sources and as reimagined by present-day fans, was a performance genre both in the sense of it being a form of expressive culture and as a form of activity in the social world of Jews. Singing khazones had an immediate secondary life as a theatrical script that interpolated listeners as participants in the world of the music. Khazones acts on the bodies of its listeners, inducing embodied responses. Khazones is what film scholar Linda Williams might refer to as a “body genre,” a form of art like the horror film or melodrama, which is meant to elicit specific physical responses such as shock, fear, or sorrow.² One of the intended responses to the cantor’s voice is the shedding of tears.³ The cantorial vocal style offers the listener specific sonic cues to this scripted response through the repertoire of vocal noises imitative of sobbing or sighing. These sounds engender a mimetic response, gesturing toward practices of introspection, memory, and emotional flooding the listeners are intended to experience.

As Yiddishist and literary critic Zohar Weiman-Kelman notes, there is a particular charge to opening one’s own body as a resonant space for the feeling worlds

of artists in the past to be rearticulated—there is a powerful eros in aesthetic communion across time.⁴ Reanimating texts or bodies of sounds from archival sources opens a variety of questions: Who are you when you allow the voice of a ghost to enter into you and speak? What comment or truth can you offer regarding the present moment if your voice is reinforced by the lineage of bodies that you are in numinous dialogue with?

What becomes of a performance genre with its unique social script when it enters into a marginalized state and disappears into the archive, no longer acting on the bodies of listeners, no longer operational as a performative object that affects the mood and spirit of its audience? Does the unheard gramophone record lie in a mystically suspended state, like the spirits of the dead are sometimes described as doing, awaiting resurrection? Are old records like the Zohar in the centuries between the time of its depicted action in first-century Palestine and its publication to the world in fourteenth-century Spain—a kind of divine immanence awaiting comprehension and integration into the life of the community? What kind of sociality can be retrieved from a text that has gone underground, that is hidden either by intentional obfuscation or insensate neglect?

According to Lurianic kabbalistic traditions, the performance of *mitzvos* (Hebrew, ritual law) can be accompanied by a second layer of meaning beyond the explicitly stated significance of the act. For example, the ritual act of putting on a *talis* (Hebrew, prayer shawl) can be accompanied by a slate of associative concepts relating to the secret meanings of the ritual, binding the body of the worshipper to a conception of the presence of the supernatural—these secondary meanings are thought to reflect the ways in which ritual acts in the divine realm, beyond the explicit meanings and contexts of the visible. These second layers of intentionality are referred to as *kavonos* (Hebrew, intention).

In a folklorized form, the same term references a more generalized sense of heightened feeling in prayer or ritual. A cantor's prayer leading is intended to initiate a state of kavono in the listener. The body of the listener performs its own internal drama, prompted by the sound of the cantor. The dialogue between liturgical text, the emotional script initiated by cantorial performance, and the body of the listener recalls the scripted mystical intentions composed by kabbalists to focus the prayer experience. The sociality of cantorial prayer leading is dependent on a listener who will work with the musical materials that a cantor provides, unspooling the meaning of the musical performance, understanding it as a form of commentary on the liturgy, and transforming it into the material for a heightened state of embodied ritual experience.

The cantor's performance is manifold. The cantor performs by singing. Simultaneously, the music proposes a script performed together by cantor and listener. The musical object, the sound of the cantor, initiates both the ritual and a theatrical presentation of the imagined Jewish folkloric past. Cantors are not only themselves when they sing khazones—they sing with the voices of a cast of characters.

This was already the case for cantors of the gramophone era, when their work was concerned with the preservation of the memory of Jewish life in premodern circumstances, as Kwartin, Vigoda, and other cantor/authors made explicit in their writings. Cantors sing as praying bodies resonating through and with their listeners. They are representatives of a Jewish collectivity.

In the context of the rapid rise of anti-Jewish violence in the early twentieth century, the cantorial imperative toward ethnographic memorialization took on new urgency and new power as a means of representation. Their work of cultural preservation no longer referenced an existing form of Jewish life in the small towns of the Pale of Settlement. It now took on a singular reality as the only means of accessing an imagined authenticity of Jewish life that no longer existed. It is easy to see how this image of a singular cultural memory of Jewish prayer that cantors were thought to have access to could be leveraged as the basis for the establishment of a professional class of synagogue professionals in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Rather than continuing the work of khazones as an art performance genre, the role of the professional cantor changed, taking on a new set of meanings as a communal functionary in the post-World War II American synagogue. The cantorial gramophone stars were rapidly rendered obsolete by new conceptions of Jewish American liturgical aesthetics perpetuated by synagogues and educational institutions, but they did not disappear entirely. Their work was preserved on reissued albums marketed mostly to elder Jews; these served as useful totems of liturgical authenticity to be occasionally referenced by the newly established American professionalized cantorate. But their presence as a musical force shifted away from their previous status as a mass media phenomenon; this change has usually been interpreted as a decline. Questions about the reality of the lachrymose narrative of Jewish culture aside, the communal function and the stylistic elements of Jewish liturgical music underwent a profound shift, both in the liberal movements and in the Orthodox world.

The Hasidic cantorial revivalists of the current generation gesture toward an absence in the texture of Jewish musical culture. Their focus on reenactment of compositions, vocal techniques, and timbral specifics of gramophone-era cantors creates a living image of something that is popularly conceived of as lost. They offer a recreation of an artifact from the past, an aspect of Jewish heritage as produced by cantors of the early twentieth century who were themselves grappling with how to represent the Jewish collective in a time of radical political instability and social change. But what are Hasidic cantorial revivalists really creating with this work of genre revival?

As Yoel Kohn and Shimmy Miller hastened to tell me, Hasidic cantorial revivalists are speaking a language that is no longer broadly comprehended, or at least no longer holds pride of place as a form of communication in the context of ritual exchange. The project of Hasidic cantorial revivalists, focused on embodying

the techniques and mastering the repertoires of the golden age, can be read as an exercise in self-deception. In this view, their effort to achieve mastery of virtuosic skills functions only as a memento mori of absences inscribed by the Holocaust, as well as the cultural losses associated with assimilation and Zionism but that offers no breach to these losses. Their music only further accentuates the extent to which Jewish bodies have lost their facility with culturally specific uses of the sense of hearing.

Or their work can be understood in a different light. The purported futility of their work can instead be seen as a refusal to accept the parameters of their hierarchically bounded world. Singing khazones pushes at the political organization of music, the “regime of listening,”⁵ which Hasidic cantorial revivalists encounter in their multiple social worlds of Jewishness, masculinity, and music. In this line of reasoning, singing khazones stands as a utopian gesture that directs listeners to a model of sacred experience and a style of communication that is obscured in the present moment but that can, perhaps, be reanimated through the medium of performance. Khazones, performed as a staged art form, provides a scaffolded structure, a cultural pedagogy of Jewish sacred listening.

According to this logic, Hasidic cantorial revivalists have developed skills toward the goal of focusing their hearers on a spiritual music practice associated with transport and transcendence, presented through the familiar behavioral modality of consumption of the arts. This methodology of performance, in which the sacred is recreated for the stage or the internet, radically democratizes access and allows for the formation of communities that defy the borders of contemporary Jewish life. The performance model offered by the old stars of khazones reawakens the possibilities of mass consumption of the sacred that were characteristic of the gramophone era.

Deep listening to khazones crossed boundaries of community in an era when “It would seem now that Yossele Rosenblatt takes the place of Karl Marx” in the affections of radical Jews, and cantorial modernist Leib Glantz vituperated that khazones “has its greatest enemies amongst the ranks of assimilationists, among the ranks of the upper bourgeoisie.”⁶ Khazones activated the crossing of boundaries—between religious Orthodoxy and radical political engagements, and between images of tradition and engagement with modernity.

These areas of slippage between seemingly irreparable breaks in the Jewish collective have a heightened significance in an era when questions about the formation of identity are of keenly felt significance for Jews of many communal affiliations. The question of what a Jew is and what commitments he or she must hold resonate on multiple sides of the cultural chasm between separatist Orthodoxy, the Jewish “mainstream,” and leftist radicalism.

Trying to answer, *what is a Jew?* is a near relative to another perennial question, *what does a Jew sound like?* The process of delving in the archive to reanimate Jewish texts, sounds, and lifeways has found adherents among individuals drawn from

a broad range of identities and backgrounds. Animators of the archive drawn from divergent identity formations are perhaps motivated by similar urges to deconstruct hierarchies of access to knowledge, to deepen the aesthetics of Jewish life, and to sensitize the community to its internal diversity.

Hasidic cantorial revivalists have located a power in old records of khazones, but what purpose they can put this power to is yet to be seen. Possibilities inhere in the fact of their self-cultivation and skill. The changes they have wrought in themselves, in the powers of their own bodies, indicate an ambition to make changes in the world as they have found it. Singing khazones is a method to achieve some kind of social magic, to create a glue that will hold together individuals of various backgrounds in a collective. Being a singer of khazones implies a specific form of personhood, but what this identity consists of is attenuated differently in each of the social spheres that I have discussed in this book. The deep listener alone with old records or in the company of aficionados is a different person than the student of professional nusakh, or the pulpit cantor, or the stage performer. In each of these social settings of music-making, the history of khazones as the sound of a Jewish radicalism and a key to nonconformist identity building is operational. Khazones is a sound that presents the internal diversity and contradictions of Jewish life, both vertically in the strata of the different communities that live today, and horizontally across the axis of history.

By performing khazones, Hasidic cantorial revivalists are manifesting a fantasy about the creation of a meeting place where the polyphony of Jewish experience can resound. In the act of performance, histories of difference and points of commonality across communal boundaries are activated. Experimentation with the creation of a new listening community is brought into focus by a sound, by a stance of passionate and heightened dramatic performance of sacred text, and by an indelible aesthetic rooted in an imagined ethnography of Jewish expressive forms. The ambition to unite multiple historical moments of Jewishness and multiple conflicting forms of contemporary identity is inherently unstable and is liable to be censured and chastised from a variety of viewpoints. Yet the power the music grants its adherents in their performances is undeniable and uncontainable, at least at moments.

How this rupture of the bounds of contemporary norms of Jewish comportment will play out is painfully ambiguous and tethered to technology—the internet is the primary ground for the expression of khazones performance today. Like the gramophone at the turn of the twentieth century, the internet is often construed by conservative voices as a site of immorality or degradation. Yet it is in the realm of media, once again, that the unique qualities of khazones as a sacred listening experience has the potential to change the world. Cantorial revivalists gesture toward an absence, but at the same time their work creates possibilities. Whether their work is an act of delusion or prophecy is not, for the moment, important; what can be seen and known is that the singers have made transformations in themselves.

The formation of new styles of personhood through the animation of the archive is real and will continue to unfold with unknown and perhaps unexpected outcomes for the multiple communities where the singers work, pressing them against the limits of history and community. What a community built around a radical aesthetic of prayer as performance would look like is a striking and provocative question. Such a community would be guided by the prophecy/delusion of artists driving them to some new and unknowable style of experience. This chapter of the story of the Hasidic cantorial revival scene is yet to be written and may never come to pass, but the work of the singers featured in this book opens up onto just such a vista of fantasy. In that unknown future, history and the needs of the present moment are locked in a tight dialogue, given voice by the passions of artists.