

---

**REVIEW: *In Search of Yiddishkeit*: Mark Zuckerman at Borough Hall, February 7, 2009**

by Alan Mallach

A good-sized audience, including quite a few faces unfamiliar from previous Roosevelt Arts Project events,

showed up at Borough Hall Saturday night to hear Mark Zuckerman talk about his personal and musical journey, and listen to some of the music he has written in the course of that journey. Mark began by talking about himself and his discovery of the Yiddish language and its rich culture, stressing that it has a rich cultural and musical heritage, and that it is far more than Klezmer music and “Rozhinkes mit mandeln.” That, in turn, led him to compose both original works for chorus to texts by Yiddish poets, as well as choral arrangements of eighteen Yiddish songs, ranging from the famous to the obscure, of which he played a collection for the audience. Since it was not practical to import a choir for the occasion, we listened to recordings of the music.

Mark’s use of the word ‘arrangement’ is a flexible one; many of the pieces he played were more free fantasies on the original songs than literal transcriptions. Particularly delightful was his reworking of the Hanukah song “Ich bin ein kleine dreidel,” where he set off the well-known melody against a counterpoint of the four letters on the dreidel (a four-sided top children play with during Hanukah), Nun, Samekh, Ayin and Heh, giving a sense of the top spinning along with the music. Other songs were more somber in tone, including Holocaust songs by Sutzkever and Manger, and a powerful version of the Passover song, “Zog, Maran,” (“Tell me, Marrano”), about the hidden observances of the secret Jews in 16th century Spain. He concluded this part of the evening with his version of “Bei mir bist du sheyn”, in which he has worked in Yiddish scat singing in a sort-of-tribute to the Andrews Sisters, who popularized the tune (in English) in the 1930’s.

Mark didn’t talk about his musical journey as much as his personal, Jewish, one, but as a musician I found it fascinating to think about how he has traveled from the strict serial, or twelve-tone, training he received at Princeton to the more tonal, while still individual and recognizably contem-

porary, music that he writes today. What relationship that journey, and the composer’s personal and Jewish journey, he only hinted at, but I think it is a significant one. Mark continued with a number of original compositions for chorus, including “Mir zaynen do tsu zingen” (We’re here to sing) a rhythmically intricate and thoroughly enjoyable work he calls a “musical mission statement”, and wrote for the Di Goldene Keyt chorale, a superb ensemble that has performed much of his music. Later on in the evening, he played a thoroughly successful arrangement he made of the piece for string orchestra, called “Theme Song.”

All in all, I came away from the evening with Mark Zuckerman with three things, each one nested, as it were, in the other. First, the pleasure of hearing beautiful music beautifully performed, even if heard in recording rather than live. Second, learning about Mark’s journey, and the role that not just Judaism, but specifically Yiddishkeit, that amalgam of religion, language and culture that formed the matrix of the Eastern European Jewish world for centuries, played in his personal and musical development. And third, the opportunity to meditate a bit on the meaning of that matrix of culture and language, which is, of course, my own heritage as well as Mark’s, and the fact that more than sixty years after its homeland was obliterated, it still survives, and brings forth fresh shoots. ■