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Roosevelt composer's musical pursuits lead to discovery of Yiddishkeit

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On Feb. 7, the Roosevelt Arts Project presented Yiddish choral arrangements of Mark Zuckerman. Zuckerman trained in classical music and composition, and composed since an early age.

Zuckerman's Jewish background braided with his musical knowledge in Yiddish folk song arrangement for a capella mixed ensemble. As a child, he was not exposed to Yiddish on a regular basis, and after his bar mitzvah he claims his practice "devolved into delicatessen Judaism." For 35 years, Zuckerman has lived in Roosevelt, whose first Borough Council minutes were recorded in Yiddish, and whose first newspaper was half Yiddish.

After studying composition with Milton Babbitt at Princeton University, Zuckerman was contacted by Aaron Lansky, founder of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass. Zuckerman accepted Lansky's invitation to visit and later became actively involved on its board. From there, he immersed himself in Yiddish workshops at YIVO and The Workman's Circle. Result: Eighteen song settings, which were performed at the 100th anniversary of the Ashkenazic Synagogue in Istanbul.

Zuckerman wished to connect with the world of his grandparents, who immigrated to the United States from Russian and Poland. Yiddish is the daily language of Ashkenazic Jews, whose original migratory region is now modern Germany ("Ashkenazi" is the medieval word for "German"; today, Ashkenazic Jews are those whose origins date back to Central Europe). Early anti-Semites officially derided Yiddish as a bastardization of German. Yiddish is actually an offshoot of medieval German vocabulary and grammar, blended with Hebrew and Slavic ingredients. Because Yiddish dialect differs so colorfully from region to region, Yiddish poetry presents exciting prospects in word choice.

Musical arrangement involves a new interpretation of an already-existing piece of music; Zuckerman cites two varieties: one as a vehicle for the performer, the other as an advocate for the music and its representative culture. Nelson Riddle's

arrangements for Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra, and Linda Ronstadt stand as modern examples of the former category; it is the latter that spurs Zuckerman.

The music and text are already in existence, but Zuckerman uses these tools as a key to a wider audience by encouraging connection through music and arrangements rather than just through the text.

Zuckerman cites four types of audiences: first, "singers and conductors. They have to be sold on the work because they're the vehicle for communication." Next, Yiddish-speaking audiences; general audiences; and finally, non-Yiddish-speaking Jewish audiences. This last audience can pose the greatest challenges due to potentially stereotypical expectations based on narrow experience of Yiddish; and resistance to venturing far from family territory of old Yiddish standards (such as "Rozhinkes mit Mandlen").

In "Mayn Rue Platz" (My Resting Place), Morris Rosenfeld's text describes the desolate experience of the immigrant's life before a sewing machine in a sweatshop. Zuckerman arranged it in honor of his grandparents Harry and Celia, Lithuanian immigrants who started ILGWU. The choral styles range from unison to harmony, from monophony to polyphony. The harmonies are pure and poignant, like the lyrics. The most poignant lyrics state, "Don't look for me in heaven/I'm languishing here in hell."

"Faier Faier" (Fire, Fire) is a Hanukkah song about frying latkes. Zuckerman chose a madrigal arrangement here in order to reflect the winter season in which we celebrate Hanukkah. The male and female sections trade melody in turns as the non-melodic sections take on a lively onomatopoeia of sizzling flames under the cooking latkes. Zuckerman inflects just enough chromaticism to illustrate the melting effect of the heat as a caution to the listener not to get burned.

"Ich Bin a Kleyner Dreydl" (I am a little dreidl) is also for Hanukkah. Most people sing this in English as "I have a little dreidel, I made it out of clay." In the original Yiddish the spinning top is made of lead. Again, the melody is traded back and forth as the non-melody singers evoke a rhythmic bouncing as they spell the letters on the dreidel's four sides: nun, gimmel, hey, shin.

Candles on a hanukiyah may be a well-known symbol of joyful Hanukkah, but "O Ir Kleyne Lichtelach (O you little candles)" illustrates the pain of Jews living in the Russia of Tsar Alexander III against the comparison of the Maccabee victory that sparked the Hanukkah celebration in the first place. The verses progress from sentimental to wistful to pained and desperate.

"Zog Maran" (Tell me, Marrano), takes place during the Spanish Inquisition during Passover, the holiday that most set Jews apart from Christians during the Inquisition because of dietary laws and blood libel. The text is a set of four questions (a significant number for Passover) posing how a Jew can observe rituals of Passover under life-threatening conditions. The questions are given in Yiddish. The answers are given in both Yiddish, as a solo line, and English, by the

chorus. Each verse intensifies as the subject becomes more life-encroaching.

Zuckerman's arrangement of "Amerika di Krekhtike" (American the Beautiful) was performed at the closing of the 100th anniversary of the Yiddish Forward at Town Hall in New York, and on Jewish night at New York Major League Baseball games, but most poignantly, at Ground Zero two months after 9/11. Zuckerman presented it both in Yiddish and in Katharine Lee Bates' original English text.

As the Nazis intended to destroy the Yiddish world, many Yiddish songs are about the Holocaust. The Nazis liquidated the Warsaw ghetto on the eve of Passover because the Jews, celebrating seders, would have their guard down. Zuckerman believes that every Yiddish concert should include Holocaust material. He presented "Dolye" (Avrum Suskever) and "Unter Dayne Vayse Sternen" (Itzik Manger). The vocal sections continued to trade melody verses in turn; this time the oppositional-voiced sound effects proved fateful in the form of spinning wheels and rushing clocks.

And what Yiddish musical presentation would be complete without theater selections? Sholom Secunda's "Dona Dona" has been mistaken for a Holocaust anthem; it was actually written for a 1940 musical that folded quickly. Zuckerman calls it "a great anti-veal anthem." His arrangement of "Bei Mir Bist Du Sheyn" includes a lively jazz section of Yiddish scat. Zuckerman ended the evening with his own lovely original Yiddish composition, "Mir Zaynen Dort tsu Zingen," an anthemic ode to Yiddish.

Mark Zuckerman's The Year in Yiddish Song is available from Centaur Records or through Amazon.com.