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A Brief History of Tel Aviv

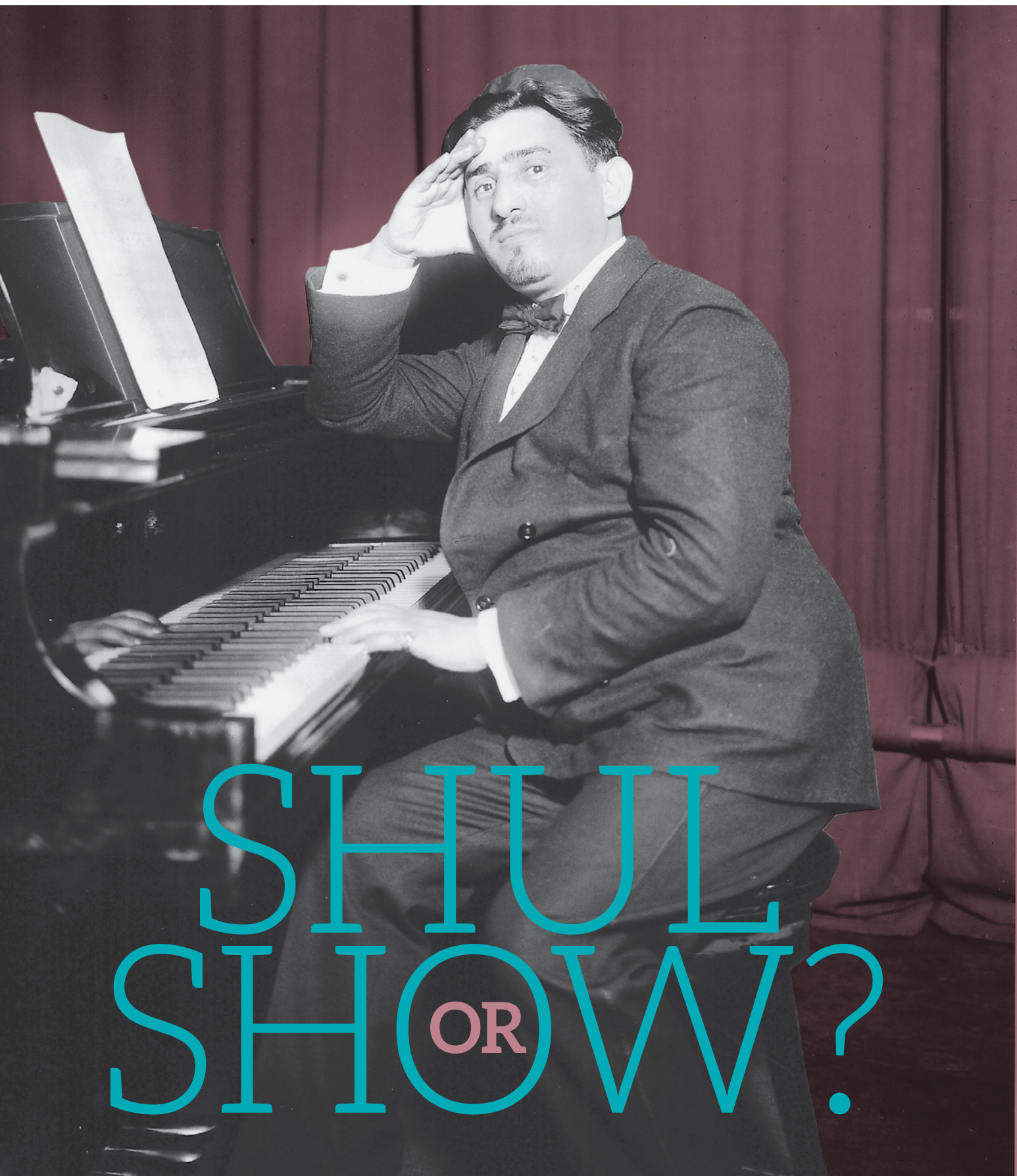
**SHUL OR  
SHOW?**

THE GOLDEN AGE OF  
CANTORIAL MUSIC

**LUBAVITCH LEGEND**  
THE SIXTH  
REBBE'S REWRITE

**MEIR  
DIZENGOFF**  
MR. TEL AVIV

**EDWARD BRAMPTON**  
JEWISH ADVENTURER  
IN THE ENGLISH COURT



# SHUL SHOW?



The huge popularity of cantorial concerts and records during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned the most talented **cantors** into celebrities. But did they cross the line from prayer to entertainment? // David Olivestone



A century ago, in the 1910s and 1920s, waves of emigration from Europe's troubled Jewish communities brought many of the world's finest cantors to American synagogues. Thanks to this extraordinary array of talent, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became known as the golden age of cantorial music. Its stars set the standard by which cantors are still judged, and the liturgical classics of those years remain synagogue staples and favorites at cantorial concerts around the world.

Music has been a central feature of Jewish worship since Temple times. As communal prayer in synagogues became the norm following the destruction of Jerusalem's Second Temple, liturgical poems composed by *paytanim* (poets) – who also often led the congregation in worship – were added to the basic prayer text. Standards had to be established regarding who could lead the services, but it wasn't always easy to find cantors to fit the bill.

Beyond the obvious requirement of a pleasant voice, the arbiters of Jewish law determined that the leader should be scholarly, fully conversant with the prayers, pious, and known for his modesty and good deeds. He should preferably be

a man of meager means, with a family to support, so as to lend his appeals to Heaven urgency and passion. Empathy with the congregation's needs was vital as well (*Ta'anit* 16a).

In the Middle Ages, there was much discussion as to which of the aforementioned requirements took precedence. Ultimately, if a candidate met at least the basic standards, his vocal ability won the day.

Following the Emancipation, as ghetto walls came down and Jews were exposed to Western culture, cantorial music grew more sophisticated. Pioneering cantors, composers, and choirmasters such as Salomon Sulzer (1804–1890, Vienna), Samuel Naumbourg (1817–1880, Paris), Louis Lewandowsky (1821–1894, Berlin), and David Nowakowsky (1848–1921, Odessa) introduced more formal and elaborate choral pieces. While consistent with the character and *nusach* (musical modes) of the various prayer services, these compositions also conformed to the musical standards of the day. Many such works became fixtures in Ashkenazic cathedral synagogues. In addition, while aspiring cantors had traditionally trained under their predecessors, quite a few now studied with professional music teachers or at

Jewish celebrities of the cantors' golden age. Cantor Mordechai Hershman

# CANTORS' HALL OF FAME

**Louis Lewandowsky**  
1821–1894  
Berlin



**Salomon Sulzer**  
1804–1890  
Vienna



**Samuel Naumbourg**  
1817–1880  
Paris



First Jew to study  
composition at the  
Berlin Academy



**David Nowakowsky**  
1848–1921  
Odessa



**Yossele Rosenblatt**  
1882–1933  
Pressburg;  
Ohab Zedek,  
Harlem, New York

**Gershon Sirota**  
1874–1943  
Warsaw



Murdered in the  
Warsaw ghetto  
uprising



**Mordechai Hershman**  
1888–1940  
Vilna; Temple Beth El,  
New York

Invested in Tel Aviv's  
Ahva neighborhood  
in 1931

**Zavel Kwartin**  
1874–1952  
Vienna, U.S.,  
Palestine



Virtuoso exponent  
of Yiddish folk  
music

**Pinhas Minkowsky**  
1859–1924  
Odessa; Eldridge St.  
Synagogue, New York



**Selmar Cerini**  
1860–1923  
Neue Synagogue,  
Breslau, Germany



Enjoyed a  
distinguished  
career in opera  
before becoming  
a chief cantor



**Moshe Koussevitzky**  
1899–1966  
Vilna, Warsaw, U.S.

Composed the classic  
tune for *Shir Ha-maalot*,  
promoted by some as the  
anthem of the Zionist  
movement

Numerous recordings (and in  
some cases even videos) of  
almost all these cantors can  
be found on YouTube

conservatories, becoming proficient in musical notation and vocal techniques.

## Virtuoso Cantors

The golden age was rooted in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In major European Jewish centers such as Vilna, Odessa, Warsaw, and Vienna, you would find a *chorshul*, a cathedral-type synagogue with a virtuoso cantor and a large choir of men and boys. But as congregants fled the increasingly oppressive imperial regimes for the New World, most cantors followed them to the *Goldene Medina*.

In New York and other big cities, leading congregations competed fiercely for the star cantors, tempting them with huge salaries and benefits. Popular opinion tends to grant countries like Italy a monopoly on great tenors. Yet talent knows no boundaries, and certain cantors were blessed with voices no less magnificent than the greatest international vocalists. Upon hearing Gershon Sirota, the famous cantor of Warsaw, opera star Enrico Caruso reputedly remarked how fortunate he was that Sirota, who'd received many offers to sing opera, preferred the synagogue.

Hailed as one of the most powerful and highly trained tenors of his time, Sirota was known for his climactic high notes and outstanding voice control. Born around 1874 in Imperial Russia's Podolia region, he landed his first position in Odessa when he was only eighteen. Just three years later, as accounts of his extraordinary prowess spread, he was appointed cantor of the enormous Vilna Synagogue, a prestigious post previously filled by some of the biggest names in cantorial music.

In 1905, Sirota became Oberkantor (chief cantor) of Europe's most renowned house of Jewish prayer, Warsaw's Great Synagogue. Seating upwards of two thousand worshippers, it was attended by the city's most prosperous Jewish elite. From 1927 on, he focused on international concert tours and was the



An ornate structure seating thirteen hundred, Temple Beth El still boasts the acoustics of a concert hall

only virtuoso cantor of his era to decline a position in America.

Trapped in Warsaw when war broke out, Sirota continued to inspire those who heard him lead High Holy Day prayers in the ghetto. He perished together with his family during the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in May 1943.

Another superstar of the golden age was Zavel (Zevulun) Kwartin. Born in the same region and year as Sirota, Kwartin possessed a beautifully expressive and powerful lyric baritone. He composed as well, and many of his emotionally

Gershon Sirota of Warsaw's Great Synagogue, in cantorial robes and tallit, on a New Year card, ca. 1912

Photo: National Library of Israel, Schwadron Collection



## Golden Age of Cantors

Cathedral synagogues. Built in 1887 on New York's Lower East Side, the Eldridge Street Synagogue boasted stained-glass rose windows, a dome seventy feet high, and a barrel-vaulted ceiling. But by the 1930s the congregation could no longer fill the vast space and moved to the basement. Today the building is a Jewish museum



Photo: Rhododendrites, 2018



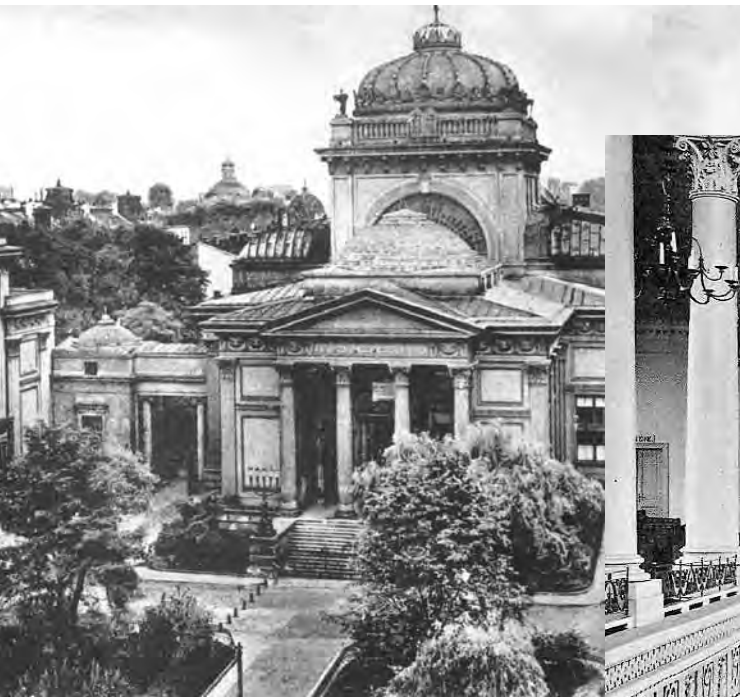
Photo: G. K. Trammner, 2006

charged pieces remain popular to this day. Having officiated in Vienna, St. Petersburg, and Budapest, Kwartin emigrated to the United States in 1919. He visited Palestine in 1926, settling there in 1931, but returned to the New York area in 1937, where he remained until his death in 1952.

Mordechai Hershman (1888–1940) served as chief cantor in Vilna in 1913 before relocating to New York in 1920. A magnificent and versatile tenor, Hershman sang the synagogue liturgy with polished elegance and charmed audiences with his mastery of Yiddish folk songs. He officiated at Temple Beth El in Brooklyn, New York's equivalent of an Orthodox *chorshul*, which engaged the greatest cantors of the day. An ornate structure seating thirteen hundred, the synagogue still boasts the acoustics of a concert hall.

Perhaps the most famous of Beth El's luminaries was Moshe Koussevitzky (1899–1966). In 1920, when Hershman left Vilna for the U.S., Koussevitzky replaced him at that city's Great Synagogue; in 1927, he succeeded Gershon Sirota as chief cantor of Warsaw. Koussevitzky spent World War II singing opera in the Soviet Union. He emigrated to the U.S. in 1947. A robust but graceful tenor with a phenomenal upper register, Koussevitzky was widely regarded as the greatest cantor of the postwar era.





When celebrity cantor Yossele Rosenblatt sang in Jewish Harlem, police often had to control the crowds

The best-known and most beloved of the celebrity cantors was Yossele Rosenblatt (1882–1933). After officiating in various European cities, Rosenblatt was brought to America in 1911 by one of New York City's leading shuls, Ohab Zedek. Located in what was then the fashionable Jewish neighborhood of Harlem, the synagogue overflowed on Sabbaths and holidays when Rosenblatt led services. Police even had to be on hand at times to control the crowds jostling to enter.

The sweet timbre of Rosenblatt's extraordinary voice was at once resonant and poignant. With his huge range and trademark "sob," he inspired congregants and concert audiences alike. Rosenblatt had perfect pitch and could sight-read even the most difficult score. And much of his repertoire was his own composition, echoing the tones of his Hasidic background.

No other cantor has ever attained such popularity and renown among audiences both Jewish and non-Jewish while retaining his synagogue position.

But Rosenblatt's life story was filled with highs and lows, from Hollywood and opera companies luring him with lucrative offers (which he consistently refused) to near poverty after a bad investment. The 1920s found him touring America in vaudeville just to pay back his creditors. Yet Rosenblatt's admirers stuck with him through it all, and he never compromised his strict Jewish observance. He died of a heart attack at only fifty-one, hard at work on a film in Jerusalem.

### Unseemly Spectacle

Two innovations enabled these cantors to win audiences beyond their own countries: recordings became commercially viable, and cantorial concerts widely acceptable. The stage was thus set for the golden age to begin.

Warsaw's Great Synagogue, on Tlomackie Street, was dedicated in 1878. The Nazis' last symbolic act in crushing the Warsaw ghetto revolt was to blow up the synagogue on May 16, 1943

Courtesy of the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw



Cantors on tour. Gershon Sirota and choirmaster Leo Leow aboard ship en route to a concert tour

Playbill for a Sirota concert at the Olympia Theatre, in London's East End

Gershon Sirota was among the first to perform outside the synagogue. Some congregants were horrified that prayers and psalms would be sung alongside secular music, and in a concert hall no less. To assert control and separate themselves from what they viewed as an unseemly spectacle, the trustees of his synagogue ruled that his cantorial cap and robe couldn't leave the premises. The concert was an overwhelming success, however, freeing Sirota to perform wherever he pleased. Word of his prowess soon spread among local officials and nobles, and his command performance for the Russian royal family became an annual engagement.

Nonetheless, cantorial concerts continued to be frowned upon in some quarters. In 1912, when Sirota was booked for a series of engagements in England, *The Jewish Chronicle* published a letter of protest deploring the fact that "our sacred and beautiful prayers should be sung at such entertainments" (May 17, 1912, p. 35). Below that letter was an editorial comment: "We cordially endorse our Correspondent's protest [...]. We have refused to allow advertisements of the entertainment to appear in our columns." Another editorial two weeks later declared that now "the cantor will be regarded as but a concert singer in clerical costume, and his work [in the synagogue] as only an exhibition of vocal talent" (May 31, 1912, p. 7).

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This negativism persisted in England, and Rosenblatt too was greeted with disapproval when he arrived for a concert tour in 1923. Even in the 1940s, when Moshe Koussevitzky stopped in London after leaving Russia, he found the city's cantorial restrictions too stifling and soon moved on to the United States.

None of this antipathy dissuaded the preeminent cantors from embarking on triumphant concert tours, primarily in the U.S., and all objections gradually faded away. These performances sold out largely because their stars' reputations had preceded them, thanks to their recordings.

### A Disgraceful Shouting Machine

Though Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, gramophone records were introduced only in roughly 1889. By the turn of the century, the most popular titles were selling millions of copies, and the best-known cantors soon signed lucrative recording contracts. The first to record was either Sirota or Polish-born synagogue and opera singer Selmar Cerini (1860–1923).

Within a few years, cantorial records were selling in the tens of thousands, and such major



recording companies as Victor, Pathe, and Columbia began issuing catalogs of Jewish music. Jewish households thrilled to the voices of distant cantors they would otherwise never have heard.

Zevulun Kwartin, then Oberkantor of the Queen Elizabeth Temple in Vienna, writes in his autobiography that in 1906 he was offered a five-year contract to record twenty pieces a year for an annual fee of three thousand kronen. “This knocked me out of my senses!” he recalls. “It was as much as my congregation was paying me for the entire year, and here all I had to do was sing for about six hours” (Zevulun Kwartin, *Mayn Lebn* [Philadelphia and New York, 1952], p. 285 [Yiddish]).

As with cantorial concerts, not everybody approved of cantorial recordings.

Spearheading the fight was the highly talented and scholarly cantor and composer Pinhas Minkowsky. Born in the Russian Pale of Settlement in 1859, Minkowsky mastered both Russian and German alongside his traditional religious education and studied music in Vienna and with several distinguished mentors. In 1889, he left his cantorial position in Odessa for the Eldridge Street Synagogue in New York, where he was promised an enormous salary. Minkowsky returned home just three years later, claiming he felt more appreciated in Europe.

To distance themselves from Sirota’s first concert, the trustees of his synagogue ruled that his cantorial cap and robe couldn’t leave the premises

As Prof. James Loeffler has pointed out, Minkowsky was “hardly an obscurantist rabbi plugging his ears to the howling winds of change. He read deeply in German philosophy and played a leading role in Russian cultural Zionist circles” (Loeffler, “The ‘Lust Machine’: Recording and Selling the Jewish Nation in the Late Russian Empire,” in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 32 [Liverpool, 2020], p. 257). Moreover, at the urging of choirmaster David Nowakowsky, Minkowsky had agreed to an organ in his synagogue (at weekday events such as weddings), a radical departure from tradition. Still, he felt very strongly that recording synagogue music was sacrilegious.

Festival prayer book tucked under his arm, Yossele Rosenblatt flees the operatic muse in a cartoon from a Yiddish magazine, 1918





Pinhas Minkowsky preferred Odessa to New York, leaving his lucrative position for the Imperial Russian city's Brody Synagogue

Photo: Israel National Library, Schwadron Collection

At ease with the new technology. Yossele Rosenblatt with a gramophone and records

An early gramophone, ca. 1906

Photo: Norman Bruderhofer

In 1910, this author of many pamphlets and articles on Jewish music published the two-hundred-page *Modern Liturgy in Our Synagogues in Russia*. Writing in Yiddish, Minkowsky railed against the whole concept: "How can we profane our holy songs," he demanded, "by



putting them in a machine that knows of no place, of no time, [and] places them before all sorts of people from all kinds of different times and different places?" (Loeffler, p. 268). Calling the gramophone "a disgraceful shouting machine," he told of hearing cantorial music played in bars, restaurants, and worse. Minkowsky even proposed rules of conduct for cantors. Number 11 reads:

Do not record synagogue compositions on the gramophone. Flee from that terrible invention. Take a holy oath not to introduce into the liturgy any melody heard from that modern desecration. (quoted in Wayne Allen, *The Cantor: From the Mishnah to Modernity* [Eugene, Ore., 2019], pp. 185–6)

The principal targets of Minkowsky's wrath were Sirota and Kwartin, whose records were now selling in the hundreds of thousands. The two countered that they'd received enthusiastic compliments and thanks from Jews all over the world, including long-term Russian conscripts, for whom these recordings were precious reminders of their lost homes and heritage.

In 1922, amid increasingly anti-Semitic Soviet policies, Minkowsky left once again for America. His best years behind him, he never regained the status he had enjoyed in Europe. He died in 1924 in relative obscurity, although his colleagues





still held him in high esteem. Ironically, in his last years Minkowsky himself sought a recording contract to generate some income. But nothing materialized, so no echo remains of his legendary voice.

## Prayer or Entertainment?

Perhaps inevitably, the immense and immediate popularity of cantorial concerts and recordings affected the music of the synagogue itself. In many major European synagogues, cantor and choir had to follow rigid guidelines. Yossele Rosenblatt, for example, was told by the board of his synagogue in Hamburg not to improvise. Frustrated by these constraints, virtuoso cantors may well have used their recordings and concerts to spread their wings, composing and singing more theatrical and elaborate pieces.

In addition, numerous prayers that weren't traditionally highlighted were set to music as cantorial showpieces. Here the line between prayer and entertainment blurred. Many of these compositions, replete with vocal acrobatics, were never intended to be sung during services. To quote Raymond Goldstein, an eminent arranger and teacher of cantorial music,



Victor Records catalogue featuring cantorial music and Yiddish melodies by Yossele Rosenblatt

Armchair opera. Ad for gramophone store in Jaffa offering easy listening to music from Caruso to Rosenblatt. Note the classic image of the gramophone and the dog, made famous by British record label HMV (His Master's Voice)

"Ironically, it has often happened that repertoire first heard at concerts somehow made its way into the synagogue, as opposed to the other way round" (Goldstein, "Ashkenazi Liturgical Music in Israel," in *Musical Performance* [1997], vol. 1, part 2, p. 57).

Zevulun Kwartin reportedly claimed that he never sang in synagogue the pieces he performed on stage or on record. Given the magnificence of his recorded legacy, that's hard to believe. But shul and show are not the same. It's unfortunate that the very success of cantorial music as entertainment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century may have led to the decline of its popularity in the synagogue, its natural home, in the 21<sup>st</sup>. ■

### Further reading:

Leo Landman, *The Cantor: An Historic Perspective* (New York, 1972); Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by His Son* (New York, 1954); Jeffrey Shandler, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (New York, 2009); Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana, Ill., 1989); Samuel Vigoda, *Legendary Voices* (New York, 1981).



### David Olivestone

A publishing consultant, Olivestone has authored many articles on cantorial music and other topics of Jewish cultural interest



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