

A Broken Concert Tour

"In the autumn, the Jewish ensemble Zimro came to America. It consisted of a string quartet, a clarinetist and pianist. All of them had been fellow pupils of mine at the Petersburg Conservatory. They had a repertoire of quite interesting Jewish music for various instrumental combinations. They asked me to write an overture for six instruments for them and gave me a notebook of Jewish melodies. At first, I didn't want to take it because I was accustomed to using only my own themes. But finally I kept it and one evening I chose a couple of nice melodies from it and began to improvise on them on the piano. I didn't place much importance on this overture, but it was quite a success." (*Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography*)

As a matter of fact, Prokofiev's Overture on Hebrew Themes has remained a repertoire piece to the present day, thanks to later fame of its author, while the Zimro Ensemble has been forgotten, despite its great contributions to Jewish music.

The story of Zimro (the word is Hebrew and means "singing") began shortly after the Bolshevik revolution in St. Petersburg (at that time Petrograd). Under the auspices of the local Society for Jewish Folk Music, a chamber ensemble was founded that was intended to publicize the works of the New Jewish School and its esthetics. "In order to maintain the artistic quality of Jewish music, the ensemble shall perform exclusively compositions approved and accepted by the Society for Jewish Folk Music," stressed the program notes to Zimro's first concert on January 21, 1918. The driving force behind the ensemble was the excellent clarinetist Simeon Bellison (1881–1953).

Bellison's musical career had begun in a military band in Smolensk, where his father served as bandleader. He started playing clarinet under his father's tutelage at a very young age, and joined his father's band when he was only nine. This is where he was discovered by the director of the Moscow Conservatory, Vasily Ilyich Safonov, who was on vacation when his train broke down forcing him to spend some time in Smolensk and he heard the band playing near the station. Safonov was so impressed by the virtuosity of the young clarinet player that he immediately offered him a chance to study at the Conservatory. Bellison was later solo clarinetist at the Bolshoi Theater and also made a name for himself as a chamber musician. At the same time, Bellison was active in the Moscow branch of the Society for Jewish Folk Music and, after moving to Petrograd in 1915, at the Society's headquarters.

On March 11, 1918, that is, less than two months after their first concert in Petrograd, the six young Jewish musicians went on tour. They carried with them a letter of recommendation from the Central Committee of the Zionist Organization in Russia. Starting at the end of March, they performed several concerts of Jewish chamber music, first in the North of Russia, then in the Urals and finally in Siberia, where civil war had already flared up. The political and economic chaos made the journey increasingly dangerous and arduous, the musicians often had to travel hundreds of kilometers in a so-called "teplushka" – a cattle car. Most of the concerts were organized by local Zionist organizations and clubs. At the end of 1918, Zimro came on the TransSiberian railroad to Harbin. The musicians spent the next few,

concertfilled months in China, Singapore and Indonesia (which belonged to the Dutch at that time), until they set sail for America in July of 1919.

By now, Zimro's concerts were no longer focusing primarily on propagating new Jewish music, but also promoting other aspects of cultural Zionism: collecting money for an "art temple" in Palestine and creating an artists' association intended to foster a "Renaissance of the Jewish Nation and develop Jewish art in Palestine". The ensemble was now called the Palestine Ensemble Zimro, and Palestine was declared to be the destination of this exceptional concert tour.

The ensemble's American debut took place in Chicago in September 1919 as part of the annual convention of the Zionist Organization of America, which now took over the job of sponsoring Zimro. The high point of the trip was the first concert at Carnegie Hall in New York on November 1, which established the group's fame. The overwhelming success of this concert, which was unanimously reported as a sensation in the city's cultural life, at the same time signified the end of the musicians' Zionist dreams. Simeon Bellison soon became first solo clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and the other musicians also found lucrative positions. Thus the trip to Palestine ended halfway – in New York. The ensemble ceased to exist in early 1921.

As early as the autumn of 1924, Bellison, together with a few colleagues from the orchestra, founded a successor ensemble which was intended to revive Zimro's repertoire, but without returning to its decidedly Zionist ideology. Stringwood, the new ensemble, was successful in its attempts to integrate Jewish music into the general concert repertoire; it preferred to perform mixed programs which also included classical pieces. This appealed both to Jewish and nonJewish audiences.

When his orchestra career ended in 1952, Bellison started one more ensemble with the same instruments – the Bellison Chamber Music Ensemble which, however, devoted itself exclusively to Jewish chamber music. His sudden death put an end to the ensemble's activities after only a short time. Before the Zimro Ensemble came to America, it had a large number of pieces in its repertoire for a variety of instrumental groups, but not a single piece in which all six musicians took part, because no one had yet composed any music for this instrumentation. Thus the Overture on Hebrew Themes by Prokofiev became the first composition for clarinet, string quartet and piano in the history of music. In Bellison's memoirs, incidentally, he tells a different story of how this piece came to be written. According to his version, it was the composer himself who approached the musicians after that memorable concert at Carnegie Hall and offered to write a Jewish piece for them. The next day, Prokofiev visited Bellison at his hotel and chose two Jewish melodies from his collection. For various reasons, this version appears more believable than Prokofiev's. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that the Zionist musicians at the peak of their success would have asked Prokofiev, a Russian, for a Jewish piece, especially since the composer was little known in America at the time and by his own admission going through a "dry spell". It would have been equally strange if they really had practically forced the valuable notebook of Jewish melodies on him. Be that as it may, however, the work premiered at a New York artist's and musician's club called The Bohemians in February 1920. The two themes which Prokofiev chose

for his work were a Freilachs, an instrumental Klezmer dance, and the Yiddish wedding song Sajt gesunder heit ("Stay Healthy") – in which the bride sadly bids farewell to her childhood home.

Inspired by the Zimro and Stringwood concerts, and by personal contacts with Bellison, more composers were soon writing works in the Jewish style for for clarinet, string quartet and piano, so that it became rather a sort of "Jewish instrumentation". These composers also included some of Bellison's former comrades-in-arms from the Society for Jewish Folk Music, such as Joseph Achron, who also moved to New York in early 1925. On November 6, 1925, the Stringwood Ensemble performed the premiere of his Children's Suite at the Aeolian Hall in New York as part of a program which otherwise featured works by Brahms, Dvorak and Taneyev. The Children's Suite was originally composed for piano solo, but the new version was destined to be much more successful owing to the exquisite richness of its tonal color. The suite is based on age-old synagogal cantillation motifs (which are used in the Jewish liturgy primarily during the reading of the Torah – the Pentateuch or first five books of the Bible). Moreover, the composer created a large number of motifs of his own in the same style. In Achron's work, however, the cantillation motifs carry no religious significance. He merely uses them as musical building blocks to construct a picture gallery from the world of children whose wit and vitality are hard to beat.

Achron's two brief pieces – Song of the Little Tailor and Women Dance – are taken from his stage music to the play Kiddush Hashem by Sholem Asch, which was first produced by Maurice Schwartz at the Yiddish Art Theater in New York in 1928. The theme of the play was the massacre of Jews perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists in the seventeenth century. Bellison himself arranged another piece by Achron for his ensemble – Sher for violin and piano. "Sher" (after the Yiddish word for "scissors") is the name of a popular Jewish folk dance, although no quotes from folklore are found in Achron's composition.

Another activist from the Society for Jewish Folk Music, Grigori Krejn, was among the small group of Jewish composers who stayed in Soviet Russia and in the 1920's tried to continue developing the idea of Jewish national music. Despite his extraordinary talent, Grigori Krejn failed to gain public recognition in his life. The Prélude (1925) is one of the small number of his works to have appeared in print. Many of his manuscripts have been lost forever, including a Jewish Rhapsody scored for the same instruments and portraying a wedding celebration. The Prélude was later orchestrated for a large orchestra and given the title of David's Song. It forms a twopiece "biblical" cycle together with another symphonic poem by Grigori Krejn – Saul and David. The dramatic middle section of the Prélude is framed by poetic-contemplative images in which the expressive, richly ornamented melos of the clarinet is cautiously supported by the strings. The few bright moments are incapable of breaking through the generally dark, melancholy mood. Before he emigrated, Mitya Stillman had likewise worked for the Society for Jewish Folk Music, albeit at its Kiev branch, about which little is known. Stillman presumably came to the U.S.A. soon after the Revolution, where he was violist in the CBS Radio Orchestra in Detroit. Stillman died at the age of 44, shortly before being able to receive his first great distinction – the NBC composition prize for his 7th String

Quartet as best chamber music work of 1936. At the instigation of Simeon Bellison, Stillman wrote a few works in the Jewish style for clarinet, including the Fantasy on a Chassidic Theme, a quartet for clarinet, violin, viola and piano, as well as a Jewish Melody for clarinet and piano. The Fantasy for clarinet sextet was to remain Stillman's only work ever published.

Julius Chajes came from Lemberg, but moved when he was thirteen to Vienna, where he established himself as a composer and pianist through his success at the First Vienna Piano Competition in 1933, among other things. A year later, he emigrated to Palestine. Although Chajes only lived in Palestine for four years, this period had a decisive effect on him, since a large portion of his works were marked by his impressions of Palestine and by Zionist themes. Chajes lived in the USA from 1938 on, working as Musical Director for the Jewish Community in Detroit. The Palestinian (Hebrew) Suite (1938) not only makes use of original themes from the Jewish liturgy and Jewish-Palestinian folklore of the 1930's, but also characteristic ways of playing folk music. The composition is an homage to the land of Israel, its spirituality, its people and its nature. Chajes dedicated it to Simeon Bellison, who played at the premiere in New York on February 17, 1946.

Allegedly, Bellison planned to spend the last years of his life in Israel. Even if this was never to be, his work nonetheless found its way to this land: in accordance with his will, his archive was brought to Jerusalem, where it is still kept at the Music Academy.

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