



Journal of Synagogue Music

Twenty Years of Women Conservative Cantors

**Two DVDs: *Great Cantors of the Golden Age*, and
Great Cantors in Cinema—a remastered edition with
seven new selections — produced by the National Center for
Jewish Film of Brandeis University
Reviewed by Roslyn Barak**

This newly released DVD version of two documentaries is digitally re-mastered and greatly improved from the original videotaped production, which

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I've owned for some years now. The upgraded visual and audio quality is immediately apparent, although there are still rough spots, especially the sound quality of the various choirs that accompany the cantors. However, for aficionados of *hazzanut* this DVD set is a joy to hear and behold.

The first DVD, *Great Cantors of the Golden Age*, boasts a narration by the incomparable Hazzan Max Wohlberg. His introduction to the film is distinguished by its concise explanation of the history of the Golden Age of Hazzanut, starting with the wave of Jewish immigration to the United States at the turn of the 20th century, which brought the cream of Eastern Europe's cantors to these shores. Hazzan Wohlberg's knowledge of each cantor's background is admirable, and he recites their names and professional accomplishments as if he were a baseball fan reciting batting averages. He does this seemingly without notes, an impressive feat, but not unusual in the world of cantorholics, as anyone who has ever mingled with such a group can attest.

What follows is footage of some of the past century's greatest cantors: Gershon Sirota, Mordechai Hershman, David Roitman, Joset Shlisky, Adolf Katchko, and perhaps the most renowned of all — Yossele Rosenblatt. Wohlberg speaks lovingly of each of these great interpreters of the Jewish liturgy, and sets the stage for their performances. Indeed, these *are* performances, specifically intended for a film audience, rather than an experience of actual tefillah. Notwithstanding, the cantors manage to convey an impression of prayer that rings true, even though it is obvious that the staged atmosphere, rolling cameras, and adjustments to God's name as it appears in the liturgy stiffens their demeanor quite a bit. But this is a small price to pay for the privilege of hearing these legendary hazzanim, in the prime of their vocal form, regaling us with their soulful interpretations of great cantorial recitatives, and leaving us a legacy of prayer as art which is fast disappearing in the world of synagogue music.

From Gershon Sirota's powerful (indeed, almost overpowering) rendering of *Hoshana*, to Adolf Katchko's stentorian bass-baritone delivery of *M'Yokh*, to Josef Shlisky's lyrical *Uv'-Shofar Gadol*, to the exquisite subtlety and sweetness of David Roitman's *Av H'Rahamin* (which actually brought me to tears), to Mordechai Hershman's *Mimkomkha*, gleaming with operatic tenor brilliance, and finally to the masterful and incomparable Yossele Rosenblatt's intense and exciting offering of *Adonai Z'kharanu*, backed by Meyer Machtenberg's choir — where we hear and see Rosenblatt's superb musicality and artistic integrity — we are treated to the most sublime experience of cantorial art. The Meyerbeer-like composition that Rosenblatt presents affords him the opportunity to showcase his extraordinary coloratura and falsetto, but one

is never aware of the performer's own ego in the mix. Rather, it is the music and holy text that drive this extraordinary man. An article in the *New York Times*, which appeared on September 22 of 2006, describes a jazz musician's reaction to a recording of Rosenblatt singing *Tikanta Shabbat*.

I started crying like a baby. The record was crying, singing and praying, all in the same breath. I said, wait a minute. You can't find those notes. Those are not 'notes.' They don't exist... I think he's singing pure spirit... he's making the sound of what he's experiencing as a human being, turning it into the quality of his voice, and what he's singing to is what he's singing about... it doesn't sound like it's going up and down; it sounds like it's going out. Which means it's coming from his soul.

This film preserves a remnant of that experience for all time. The art of the cantor remains alive so long as we have witness to that art, though the practice of that art may fade away. We must pity the generations that will never know the excitement and glory of true *hazzanut*. Max Wohlberg ruefully admits that those days are probably gone, yet he argues that it is important to know what once was, even if we are too close to a still emerging American style to be able to make it out. Perhaps we can hope for a future renaissance to occur. In the meantime, the film generously provides a remembrance as well as special features which shouldn't be missed: additional performances by Katchko, Roitman and Rosenblatt, that are equally superb. All in all, this is a worthy production and a gift to the Jewish world.

The second DVD, *Cantors in Cinema*, is narrated by longtime radio and television commentator Martin Bookspan, and focuses on appearances by noted cantors in Hollywood cinematic productions, whether feature films or documentaries. Moishe Oysher's melodramatic performance in *Overture to Glory* (1940) reminds one of the role played by Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927): the cantor who becomes a pop singer who then returns to the synagogue on (what else?) the eve of Yom Kippur; to chant *Kol Nidre* (and, in this case, replace poor Manfred Lewandowski mid-chant). This is a delightful opportunity to see Oysher at his entertaining and cantorial best, and there are more opportunities later on in the film, including the section known as Special Features.

For sheer entertainment value, however, nothing tops Leibel Waldman's shenanigans in the 1931 movie short, *Cantor on Trial*, a takeoff on the familiar song *Khazonim of Probe* by Sholom Secunda. Waldman's characterizations of three different cantorial candidates at an audition is priceless, and the auditioning committee is a hilarious bunch of Yiddish actors who are, pardon the expression, quite the "hans."

But once again, Yossele Rosenblatt steals the film, and our hearts, with his renderings of cantorial recitatives and Yiddish songs in a documentary travelogue made to acquaint diaspora Jews with Palestine in June 1933. This is actually the final footage of Rosenblatt, for he passed away while making the documentary. The sight of crowds attending his funeral is terrifically moving, and here we have it filmed for posterity. At that point one realizes the importance of this DVD as an historical document, a must for *ohavei Yisrael* everywhere. Rosenblatt is also presented later on in the Special Features section of the DVD, offering an emotional rendering of *Yahrzeit Lied*, a tragic Yiddish song which opens and closes with *hazzanut*.

Moshe Koussevitsky's chanting of *Eil Malei Rahamim* in the film *We Who Remain*, a sobering documentary about the remnant of the Polish Jewish community just after the Holocaust, also appears on the DVD. Koussevitsky — the chief cantor of Warsaw before World War II — was invited back to sing for what was left of the community at a ceremony of remembrance. It is a painful clip to watch, and his soaring recitation of the Memorial Prayer is a wonder. Koussevitsky is brought back in Special Features as well, with an affecting rendition of *V'li-Y'rushalayim Irkha*. Josef Seiden's 1931 film *The Voice of Israel* features Mordechai Hershman singing *Hayom Harat Olam*, and again we are treated to his spectacular voice — a silver trumpet that could melt stone.

This noteworthy project cannot fail to delight and fascinate fans of Jewish music and the Jewish people, historians, archivists, and anyone else who may have the privilege of viewing the DVDs. Kol ha-kavod to Producer/Cantor Murray Simon for his passionate pursuit of this restoration, and to Director Rich Pontius and Executive Producer Sharon Pucker Rivo. We are truly blessed by their efforts.

Before entering the cantorate, Roslyn Barak enjoyed a career as concert recitalist and opera singer. She received her musical training at the Manhattan School of Music, and her cantorial investiture at the Hebrew Union College in New York. She has been the cantor of Congregation Emannu-El in San Francisco since 1987, chairs the American Conference of Cantors' Publications committee, and serves on the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Prayer Book Editorial committee. Recently, she toured Germany in conjunction with the release of her CD, The Jewish Soul.

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