



Lazar Weiner: Jewish Cultural Catalyst, Master of Yiddish Art Song, or Both?

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Few of us are familiar today with the name Lazar Weiner, a brilliant composer, musician, conductor and educator in the arena of Jewish Music over the course of the twentieth century. This unsung hero – pun intended – deserves some attention from those of us in the Jewish world who may not be familiar with his contributions. We all know the household names of American Jewish music, like Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein and in more recent times, Bob Dylan (Zimmerman) or Michael Tilson Thomas, grandson of Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky. But Weiner's contributions I believe far exceed these 'greats' whom everyone has heard of. Why do I say that? Because his influence and reach extended into every aspect of Jewish community life in America over the course of six decades, from the 20s through the 70s. This month's column will focus on his exceptional contributions.



Lazar Weiner
1897 - 1981

Born in Cherkassy in the Ukraine in 1897, Lazar Weiner emigrated with his family to America when he was a teenager. His musical abilities were recognized at an early age back in the 'old country' and his parents, of modest means, sent him to the Choir School at the Brodsky Synagogue in Kiev. He even performed with the Kiev Opera and had a small scholarship to study at the Conservatory of Music in Kiev, where all his training was in traditional Western classical music.

Upon his arrival in the United States in 1914 at the age of 17, Weiner quickly scrambled to find ways to make a living. His talents took him to silent movie houses, where he played the piano, then to helping voice teachers in Carnegie Hall studios as an accompanist, and even to being an assistant conductor of the Brooklyn-based Mendelsohn Symphony.

His big break came when he was invited in 1931, after conducting a number of other Yiddish choruses for a number of years, to become the conductor of the Workmen's Circle Chorus. In that era, a time of social activism and workers' labor movements in America, this chorus stood out as the chorus of the Jewish labor movement. Weiner agreed to take on the leadership offered, but only after his employers agreed to a one year hiatus for the chorus from all public performances.

He insisted that this ragtag group of Jewish laborers, coming from all over Eastern Europe and Russia, align on a single pronunciation of the Yiddish language and he wanted to spend that year preparing them. His employers agreed and for the next three decades, Weiner led an illustrious group of amateur choristers in annual concerts at Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, the major performance venues of those days. The Lazar Weiner archives at YIVO at the Center for Jewish History in New York City are filled with memorabilia from that era, including programs and marketing materials to sign up new members.

In addition to his role as conductor of the Workmen's Circle Chorus, it may come as a great surprise to learn that Lazar Weiner was also engaged by the Central Synagogue of New York – one of the country's leading Reform temples established by German Jews in the mid-1800s, -- as its Music Director from the early 1930s until the mid-1960s. In that capacity, he conducted a professional choir and worked with renowned cantors at the temple. He worked very closely with Rabbi Jonah B. Wise and together they created a weekly radio program, "Message of Israel" that was broadcast across America for many decades. Through Weiner's influence, sacred choral works of such composers as Darius Milhaud and Ernst Bloch were heard in some cases for the very first time. In addition, Lazar Weiner himself composed a number of 'sacred services' that were performed at Central Synagogue and other congregations following their publication.

But there was another side to this most exceptionally talented cultural catalyst, ever active in the Jewish community, be it at a Reformed Jewish Workers Chorus was Lazar Weiner's composer of Yiddish Early in his American life, Weiner had the good introduction to a group of Yiddish poets, and circle, he gained a appreciation of the beauty of Yiddish poetry. Eventually he set these poems to music and his accompanying them and the accompaniments



Cover from 45th
Workmen's Circle
Chorus Program,
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The melodies were highly sophisticated and can be compared to the great art songs of such Western composers as Schubert or Schumann. As early as the late teens and early 20s, he set poems by his good friend Nachum Baruch Minkoff who studied law, but continued to write poetry in Yiddish. And in later decades, he even set some Yiddish religious poetry by Rabbi Abraham Heschel.

While Lazar Weiner always strived to create a 'Jewish music' full of Jewish references and a Jewish musical feeling, he always declared he was not an observant Jew in the traditional sense. Yet his devotion to the art form of Jewish music in all its varieties, led him to invitations in the 1960s and 1970s as faculty member of the distinguished cantorial schools of his day, both at Hebrew Union College and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Lazar Weiner received numerous invitations from all over the country to visit congregations as scholar/composer-in-residence. In 1968, Weiner was chosen to receive the Frank L. Weil Award of the National Jewish Welfare Board for Distinguished Contribution to American Jewish Culture. In his notification letter, the organization's president wrote: "You were the overwhelming choice of the Jury for this Award in recognition of your exceptional and creative achievements as a composer, conductor, lecturer and teacher." He followed in the footsteps of Leonard Bernstein and Ernst Bloch in receiving this award.

On May 12, at 7:00 P.M. in New York City, at the Center for Jewish History, 15 West 16th Street, the YIVO Sidney Krum Young Artists Concert Series will present a program of Lazar Weiner's Yiddish Art Songs. I have been invited to choose the program, to introduce it, and give a brief lecture about Lazar Weiner. Anyone interested in attending may contact me for free tickets.

Many of you know that in 2008-2009, I held a Milstein Fellowship at the Center where I researched the Lazar Weiner archive filled with numerous letters, photos, and concert programs from his long career. Among the letters I came across is one from Albert Einstein and another from Franklin Delano Roosevelt extending gracious thanks for Weiner's dedication of his choral oratorio, "To Thee America" to these important contributors to American life. Immigrant Jew, Lazar Weiner is an exemplar of American Jewish music culture to be greatly admired for his vast contributions and his deep embracing of both Jewish and American values.

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