Leftist, Jewish, and Canadian Identities Voiced in the Repertoire of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, 1939-1959[1]

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Abstract: This article focuses on a twenty-year period of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, during which the ensemble was conducted by Emil Gartner. Considering historical contexts, including political pressures and social frameworks, the author shows how repertoire choices were linked to overlapping patterns of identity, notably the choir as a voice for progressive political ideas, as a Jewish community group, and as a player in the emerging multicultural Canadian fabric.

The Toronto Jewish Folk choir began in 1925 as the *Frieheit Gezang Farein*,[2] or Freedom Singing Society, a mixed choir made up of young working-class Jewish immigrants who were part of the growing labour movement of the period. The choir was used both as vehicle for highlighting labour issues to fellow working-class Jewish colleagues, and as a community group for new Yiddish-speaking immigrants. During these early years (1925-1939) their repertoire mirrored this dual role of the choir; it consisted primarily of pieces with working-class or socialist themes and Jewish folk songs.

The year 1939 brought with it a number of significant changes for the choir. This was due not only to the changing climate of world politics, but was also the result of the arrival of a new, dynamic conductor named Emil Gartner. During his tenure, Gartner brought fresh enthusiasm to the group, helped the choir grow to over 130 members and raised the choir to a new level of professionalism. The activity of the choir increased from one concert a year to several concerts a year, they sang to sold-out audiences in Massey Hall, were recorded by the CBC, and engaged such artists as the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Lois Marshall, Jennie Tourel, Jan Peerce and Paul Robeson. The years that Gartner conducted the choir, 1939-1959, which I will refer to as the Gartner years, are the focus of this paper.

During this lively part of the choir's history, their repertoire also changed considerably from what it had been in the early years. In fact, at first glance their repertoire choices seem a unique and even bizarre mix of styles and cultural traditions. Jewish folk songs and pieces highlighting working-class issues still appear, but to this repertoire they added folk songs from around the world, western classics, and a wide variety of contemporary twentieth century works.[3] For example, one Massey Hall concert in December of 1949 included a traditional Jewish wedding song ("Hecher, Besser"), a

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[2] I have kept the spellings of Yiddish transliterations to the Roman alphabet as they are found in the archives. As such, they may not be consistent or conform to modern-day transliteration practice.

[3] The majority of the choir would have learned this music by rote.

Russian folk song in Yiddish ("Vi Der Kayser Lebt"), a Spanish Loyalist song, a set of Black Spirituals with Paul Robeson (including "Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho"), the Canadian premiere of a work by American composer William Schuman ("A Free Song"), and the "Gloria" from Bach's Mass in B-Minor. What prompted these repertoire choices?

Some of the best resources for answering this question are the choir's programme texts from the Gartner period. These texts – sometimes in the form of notes on repertoire, other times in essay format – show that the choir made explicit connections between its mission and its repertoire. Using these texts, and outlining the historical context from which the choir emerged, this paper will demonstrate how their repertoire choices were related to three overlapping conceptions of identity within the choir: as a voice for progressive political ideas, as a Jewish community group, and as a participant in a multicultural Canadian culture.

Historical Context

In order to understand the political aspects of the choir, a small explanation of its historical context is warranted. By 1931, after thousands of Jews had come to Canada from Eastern Europe to escape racial oppression and poverty, Toronto's Jewish population was the city's largest non-British ethnic group (7.2 percent, or 45, 000 people).[4] Like other North American cities with large Jewish populations at the time, Toronto's Jewish labour was concentrated in the garment industry or the so-called needle trades. [5] Although the level of anti-Semitism and poverty were not as extreme in Canada as these Jewish immigrants had witnessed in their homelands, life in the New World was not what they had hoped it would be. Many of these working-class Jews, frustrated by extremely low wages, and harsh, unsanitary working conditions, became leaders in an emerging secular, socialist-oriented labour movement which organized trade unions in all areas of the garment industry. These unions also acted as social and cultural centres within Toronto's Jewish community, offering a space for informal socializing in Yiddish, sports teams and even courses in English and various socialist topics. They were a key component in the development of an activistic, pro-labour, and socialist-oriented culture within Toronto's Jewish community.[6]

During this same period, secular, socialist-oriented Jewish fraternal organizations were also established. These groups offered mutual benefits to their members, such as death benefits, sick benefits, a cemetery, a credit union, Jewish children's schools (*shules*) and, like the unions, a wide range of cultural activities. The latter included English classes, lectures on socialist topics, sports activities, instrumental ensembles and groups devoted to singing, theatre, and dance. In addition to all of the above, these groups were also involved in political action and they gave support to the trade union movement. One of the oldest and largest of these organizations was the *Arbeiter Ring* (Workmen's Circle), which had branches all over North America, including a Toronto branch that began in 1908.[7]

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[4] Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 12. Between 1891 and 1930, 200,000 Jews immigrated to Canada.

[5] Ibid,16.

[6] Ibid, see chapter 2, "Pulling in One Direction: The Development of Jewish Working-Class Activism," 35-54.

[7] Ibid, 53.

It was out of this secular Jewish leftist community that the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir arose. During the 1920s and 1930s the choir was associated with the Labour League – a communist-oriented fraternal organization which had split away from the *Arbeiter Ring* in the 1920s.[8] In 1945 the Labour League joined similar leftist Jewish organizations around Canada and formed a national organization called the United Jewish People's Order (UJPO),[9] which continued to sponsor the choir in an arms-length relationship throughout the Gartner period. During the 1940s and 1950s the demographic of the choir began to change from its working-class origins, but they continued to identify themselves with the pre-war Jewish labour movement and hold to a socialist-oriented, pro-labour outlook.[10] Perhaps most significantly, the choir inherited the preceding generation's spirit of activism.

The Choir as a Political Voice

This enduring spirit of activism can be found clearly in the choir's programme texts during the Gartner years. Although very few choir members would have been involved in the work of official political parties, the choir clearly saw their identity as political in a broad sense; they considered it their mission to use music as a means to highlight socio-political injustices, and even as weapon in the struggle against such injustices. The choir's slogan during the Gartner years – "With song to the struggle; Through struggle to victory" – makes this sense of purpose and mission clear, and also expresses the socialist belief that historical progress will come about through struggle. Similar "calls to battle" can be found throughout the programme notes as well. Some examples include: "Sing as you fight, and fight as you sing!";[11] "We shall go forward with our songs into the fight for better life, and through our spirit, convictions, and with the assistance of all men and women of goodwill, we shall succeed";[12] and "Long may our Toronto Jewish Folk Choir live and flourish and continue to serve the needs of our people in the struggle for progress and peace."[13] These rousing directives and declarations, variations of which can be found throughout the choir's materials, demonstrate the choir's continuing sense of purpose and even radicalism.

Although a spirit of activism remained during the 1940s and 1950s, the political focus of the choir began to change with the onslaught of World War II. In response to the growing threat of fascism and the horrors of war, particularly the holocaust and the use

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[8] Although all these fraternal organizations were fundamentally socialist-orientated, various splinter organizations developed which held to communist, bundist, and Zionist versions of socialism. According to Morris Biderman, former League president, although there was no official link between the League and the Communist Party, many of its key leaders were Party members. A fundamental difference between the League and other Jewish organizations was their pro-Soviet orientation. Morris Biderman *A Life on the Jewish Left* (Toronto: Onward Publishing, 2000), 50.

[9] Biderman, 68.

[10] According to Irving Abella, a continued commitment to the leftist movement despite class change was typical in the Jewish community. Irving Abella, introduction to Biderman, xv.

[11] National Library of Canada (hereafter NLC), Toronto Jewish Folk Choir fond, MUS 43, Box 1, Message from Dominion & Ontario Communist-Labor Total War Committee, Programme, 21 May 1943.

[12] Ibid, Box 2, "A Year's Achievement," Max Burstyn, Programme, 25 March 1947.

[13] Ibid, Box 2, "In Truth, a Cultural Institution," Fagel Freeman-Gartner, Programme, 3 June 1950.

of the first atomic bomb, the issues highlighted by the choir broadened to emphasize freedom, peace, human rights, and the fight against fascism. For Toronto's Jewish community in particular, basic human rights and racial equality became more critical issues in light of Hitler's massacre of Jews, and sweatshop struggles became less crucial as their community gradually moved out of the working class. This did not mean that the plight of the working class was forgotten by the choir – indeed it remained a key issue – but it no longer dominated their programming choices.

One particular political outlook which may have set the choir apart from others working on the left was their belief that the Soviet Union was a leader in cultural activity and political thought. In fact, the choir's sponsoring organization, the Labour League, split away from the more moderate *Arbeiter Ring* in the 1920s largely because of their support of the communist movement and of the Soviet Union. Their continued support of the Soviet Union during the Cold War is what caused the UJPO (the Labour League's successor) to be expelled from the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1951, perhaps under pressure from the RCMP.[14] The support of the Soviet Union, both by the UJPO and the choir, was constant throughout the 1940s and 1950s, while Canada's attitude underwent many changes – Russia was an enemy at the beginning of World War II, then an ally from 1941-45, and was finally viewed with increasing suspicion as the Cold War began. It was not until after Kushchev's famous "secret speech" in 1956, which detailed the brutality of Stalin's reign, that support for the Soviet Union wavered in this quadrant of the Jewish left. In fact these revelations caused brutal disillusionment with communism and the Soviet government and set off enormous upheaval in the Jewish leftist community.

Repertoire choices that reflect these various leftist and progressive perspectives are outlined below. Key issues highlighted by the choir in programming choices include the struggle of the working-class, support of Soviet Russia, championing art which is "of the people," harmony and equality among all people (what they termed the "brotherhood of mankind"), peace, and the continuing development of culture generally.

As in the early years of the choir, support for the struggle of the working class can be seen in their performance of works that discuss the hardships of working-class life and call for revolution. These works are usually in Yiddish – some of them by famous Yiddish writers such as Isaac Peretz, Itzik Feffer, David Edelstadt and Morris Winchevsky – and most of them are set to music by the Jewish socialist composer Jacob Schaefer. Two large-scale examples include the cantata *A Bunt Mit a Statchke* (A Revolt and a Strike), which tells the story of two Russian workers who attempt to lead a strike;[15] and the oratorio *Tzvei Brider*,[16] a fable about materialistic greed destroying the relationship between two working brothers. Examples of shorter works include musical settings of poems, such as "S'Falt a Shnay," which laments the hardship of the needle trades – "Day and night I sit bent over my sewing; / The slow drizzle outside is like the dreariness of my wasted life"[17]– and the revolutionary poem "Un Du Akerst," which asks the worker "And you plough and plant the seed, / And you clad the world you feed, / And you hammer, spin the yarn, / But what, my people do you earn?"[18] Working-class songs

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[14] Biderman, 79.

[15] NLC, MUS 43, Box 2, Programme, 10 Nov 1946.

[16] Ibid, Box 2, Programme, 3 June 1950.

[17] Ibid, Box 3, Programme, 14 May 1955.

[18] Ibid, Box 2, Programme, 4/6 December 1948.

of other cultural traditions were also included; with Paul Robeson the choir performed the American protest song "Joe Hill," which tells the story of a migrant worker who became a martyr of the trade-union movement,[19] and, in a later concert, the Black Spiritual "Pick a Bale O' Cotton."[20]

The choir's support of the Soviet Union is exemplified in their consistent inclusion of Russian works – Russian folk songs as well as concert works. Not surprisingly, Russian works are especially prevalent during the war, after Russia was invaded by Germany and became Canada's official ally (1941). One 1944 concert in Massey Hall, sponsored by the National Council for Canadian-Soviet Friendship, was entirely Russian in content.[21] It opened with the singing of God Save the King and the Anthem of the USSR and included Russian folk songs and a cantata for choir and orchestra, *The Birth of Russia*, by Yuri Shaporin.

Other Russian works incorporated during the Gartner years include Musorgsky's *Joshua Ben Nun* and excerpts from *Boris Godunov*, as well as pieces by Alexandrov, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Kabalevsky, and Shostakovich.[22] In 1950, despite the emerging Cold War, the choir sang a song by Schaeffer called "Unzer Firer" or "Our Leader" – a song in memory of Lenin.[23] Shostakovich's oratorio *Song of the Forests*, a pro-Stalin work performed in 1951, is explained in the programme notes as being "inspired by the Stalin master plan for the transformation of nature in the Soviet union."[24] The choir performed it a second time in 1953 two months after Stalin's death, likely as a tribute.[25]

Occasionally, Russian works were described in such a way in programme notes as to emphasize their socialist realist style, making it clear that they were included not just because the composers happened to be Russian, but also because they employed a Soviet-inspired compositional aesthetic. One 1948 concert, for example, includes notes about Musorgsky's aesthetics that quote the composer as believing that an artist's mission is "to show life, wherever it is, Truth, however bitter" and that "the artistic presentment of beauty alone is sheer childishness."[26] A ballet suite by Kabelevsky, *Golden Sheaves,* is also described as a realistic piece. The notes explain that unlike previous ballets which "dealt with either some legendary incident or life in the court of the Czar," this work attempts to "reproduce in the ballet form the [e]very-day life of the Kolkhoz [or collective farms]."[27]

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[19] Ibid, Box 2, , Programme, 3/5 December 1949.

[20] Ibid, Box 2, Programme, 3 June 1950.

[21] Ibid, Box 1, Programme, 12 February 1944.

[22] Two of the pieces were not performed by the choir. The Rimsky-Korsakov piece ("Chanson Hebraic") was performed by guest soloist Igor Gorin (27 November 1942); The Kabelevsky piece (*Golden Sheaves*) was performed by Fagel Freeman-Gartner, the choir's pianist (26/27 May [1944]).

[23] NLC, MUS 43, Box 2, Programme, 3 June 1950.

[24] In fact, this pro-Stalin work was composed by Shostakovich as penance after his music was criticized by the Soviet government in 1948.

[25] Again, the more gruesome details of Stalin's leadership, such as his execution of intellectuals and Jews, were not known until 1956.

[26] NLC, MUS 43, Box 2, Programme, 4/6 December 1948.

[27] Ibid, Box 1, Programme, 26/7 May [1944].

Singing music that reflects the realities of everyday life and is "of the people" is a running theme throughout programme texts which discuss the choir's overall mission. As explained in the 25th Anniversary programme, "The purpose which brought [the choir] together a quarter century ago remains the purpose of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir today – to express the true culture that is inherent in the people."[28] Not surprisingly, this included singing folk songs. Indeed, folk songs – both Jewish and non-Jewish – continued to be a main ingredient in programming choices throughout the decades. These songs often celebrated everyday peasant life, such as the Russian folksong "Nishka" about a boss who needs help with everything but eating, the Yiddish "Dos Pastuchl" about a shepherd who has lost his sheep, or the French-Canadian "Youpe! Youpe!" about an unsuccessful suitor.

Folk songs were also understood as a way to express solidarity with all poor, persecuted, and exploited people, or, in the words of the choir's president, "carr[ying] a message to the enslaved and oppressed people . . . of the rest of the world"[29] With this spirit of camaraderie, the choir sang such songs as the Black Spiritual "Sisters and Brothers" which proclaims "Let the blood of Negroes not be spilled anymore!";[30] the Spanish Loyalist song "Rumbala" which declares "We fight the fascists, we must destroy them";[31] and a foreboding Eastern European lullaby with the words "Sleep, my child – as you grow older you will come to know the difference between the rich and the poor."[32] Programming this diversity of folk songs of other nations was also seen as exemplifying unity of all people and world peace, or the "spirit of the brotherhood of man."[33] Although folk songs of Eastern Europe were most common, the choir presented a huge variety of different folk traditions. Besides Jewish folksongs – both Yiddish folksongs and traditional Hebrew pieces – the choir included the folk songs of the Russians, the Polish, the Ukrainians, the Scottish, the English, the Spanish, the Italians, the Indonesians, the Chinese, the Palestinians, the African-Americans, and the French- and Maritime-Canadians.

Given the emphasis placed on music which is "rooted in the people," it may seem surprising that the choir also included works from the western art tradition. But they did not see people's music and art works as necessarily exclusive. In an essay describing what appropriate, progressive culture should look like, choir manager Max Burstyn holds up Beethoven, Mozart, Berlioz, Musorgsky, and Verdi as composers who "took their stand with the people in their day for the progress of civilization."[34] For example, Beethoven's cantata *The Glorious Hour*, which the choir performed in 1954, was seen as progressive because it celebrated peace. Burstyn explains how this work fits into the choir's programming policies in his announcement of the choir's upcoming concert in the leftist Jewish paper *Vochenblatt*:

This [Beethoven work] is in keeping with the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir tradition: always on the look-out for timely, appropriate and off-the-

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[28] Ibid, Box 2, "Twenty-Five Years of Cultural Growth," Murray Tate, 3 June 1950.
[29] Ibid, Box 2, "Past and Future of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir," Dr. J. S. Chaikoff, Programme, 3 June 1950.
[30] Ibid, Box 2, Programme, 25 March 1947.
[31] Ibid, Box 2, Programme, 19 November 1947.
[32] Ibid, Box 2, Programme, 3/5 December 1949.
[33] Ibid, Box 2, Programme, 25 March 1947.
[34] Ibid, Box 2, "The Role of the Canadian Artist," Max Burstyn, Programme, 3 June 1950.

beaten-path music. Emil Gartner has brought this score to light, and it is as fitting today as it was over a hundred years ago when Beethoven wrote it for the Vienna Congress after the defeat of Napoleon. Its theme of world peace is more pertinent at the present moment than perhaps ever before.[35]

Art pieces did not necessarily have to address political issues to be sung by the choir. Simply fostering cultural pursuits generally was understood as a way to promote the progress of humankind. As the choir's pianist, Fagel Freeman-Gartner explains, bringing quality music to the masses was another part of the choir's mandate – "Our aim has always been clear . . . [to] encourage all oppressed peoples with our songs . . . [and to] bring the immortal music of classical and contemporary composers to the people."[36] Culture is frequently described as weapon or tool that should be given to the people in their struggle for a better world. As the choir's president argues, "the value of culture as a weapon in the hands of the people ... cannot be over-estimated."[37] From this perspective it is not surprising that Emil Gartner, whose training had been in the western art tradition, taught the choir works by Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Verdi, and invited guest soloists who performed operatic arias by the likes of Rossini, Puccini, Offenbach, and Bizet.[38]

The desire to foster culture also prompted the choir to include a wide range of contemporary twentieth-century works. These included the works of John Weinzweig, Barbara Pentland, Louis Applebaum, Bernard Rogers, Aaron Copland, William Schuman, Earl Robinson, Alan Bush, Benjamin Britten, and Dmitry Shostakovich. This dedication to contemporary music is quite remarkable considering the conservative musical climate in Canada at the time, and that the choir was made up of amateurs, most of whom learned music by rote. Among twentieth- century works performed by the choir there is a preference for works that use folk materials as a base, and works which have politically astute subjects. Examples of the former include Weinzweig's *To the Lands Over Yonder*, based on Inuit folksong, and his folk ballet *Red Ear of Corn*, which uses First Nations and French-Canadian folk themes, Applebaum's *Newfoundland Songs*, the *Yellow River Cantata*, by Chinese composer Hsu Hsing-Hai, and *My Homeland: Armenian Cantata in Five Parts* by A. Arutunian. Pieces with progressive themes include those that comment on the horrors of war, such as Britten's *Ballad of Heroes*, Schuman's, *A Free Song*, Bush's *Lidice*, and Max Helfman's, *Di Naye Hagode*. Two works by American composers, *Farwell to a Hero* by George Kleinsinger and *Lonesome Train* by Earl Robinson, are homages to Abraham Lincoln which celebrate him as a fighter for freedom and human rights.

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[35] Ibid, Box 3, "Folk Choir Premiers Beethoven Work," Max Burstyn, *Vochenblatt*/Canadian Jewish Weekly Clipping, vol. 14, No. 691, 28 January 1954.

[36] Ibid, Box 2, "In Truth, a Cultural Institution," Fagel Freeman-Gartner, Programme, 3 June 1950.

[37] Ibid, Box 2, Max Burstyn as quoted in "Great Jubilee Concert June 3," Clipping, [May 1950].

[38] See, for example, programmes including Daniel Duno, Jan Peerce, Frederick Lechner, Jennie Tourel, Regina Resnik, Lois Marshall, Alexander Kipnis, Frank Palmer, etc.

The Choir as a Jewish Voice

While the above material makes it clear that the choir saw itself as an activistic organization, this did not diminish its role as a community group for Jews in Toronto. As explained above, the culture of the union halls and the fraternal organizations associated with the Jewish labour movement had an all-encompassing, community-building approach. Far from simply offering strike support, monetary benefits, or political activism, these groups gave new Jewish immigrants a Canadian Jewish community. In the same way, the choir was not only a tool in activism, but also a community group and a place to share Jewish culture. As Molly Myers, long-time member of the choir describes, the choir was both "an ideology and a way of life."[39] It offered companionship with other Yiddish-speakers and the opportunity to sing Hebrew and Yiddish folksongs. The choir's social role was extended beyond rehearsal hours and included a bowling club, day trips, banquets, dances and parties. During the late 1940s and early 1950s the choir also put out a monthly newsletter discussing choir events, news in the life of choir members, and political issues. That the newsletter was intended for Jewish readers is evident in occasional jokes and Yiddish references, such as one appeal for letters to the editor – "*Schreib a brivele der Editor!*"[40] – or a description of how long the NBC Orchestra would last without Toscanini – "about as long as a schmaltz herring at a UJPO branch meeting."[41]

There is also evidence to show that many involved in the Jewish left saw their Jewish and socialist identities as interconnected. As Frager points out, the community of the Toronto Jewish labour movement experienced both a strong sense of class consciousness and ethnic identity, and their commitment to socialist activism was a response to both economic and racial oppression.[42] Many Jews regarded the fight against political injustice, racial intolerance, and social and economic inequality as an appropriate response to the discrimination that the Jewish diasporic community had experienced around the world. For others, socialist ideas were an expansion of Judaic or Zionistic beliefs, or a replacement thereof. As Abella puts it, "To the forlorn, exploited Jew, steeped in the Old Testament, [socialism] held out great appeal. It had . . . the prophetic ring of the coming of the Messiah."[43]

This interconnectedness of Jewish and political identities is also apparent in the choir's programme texts. In discussing the mission of the choir, the choir's Jewish and political identities are often presented as one whole. In a 1943 programme Emil Gartner comments that because his choir is "the only Jewish choir of larger size in Toronto . . . [it has] special duties." He then describes these duties – to present progressive works so that "the final crushing of Hitlerism and all its stands for [is accomplished]."[44] Gartner makes a clear connection here between being Jewish and fighting fascism. Similarly, in a speech at a choir banquet in 1946 the president of the choir, Dr. Chaikoff, emphasizes the ability of the Jewish people to identify with others who are suffering or oppressed, and connects this ability with a belief in freedom and democracy:

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[39] As quoted in Ester Reiter, "Secular *Yiddishkait*: Left Politics, Culture, and Community," *Labour/Le Travail* 49 (Spring 2002): 136.

[40] NLC, MUS 43, Box 4, Choir Notes, September 1950.

[41] Ibid, Box 4, "Sour Notes," Max Burstyn, Choir Notes, December 1950.

[42] Frager, 43-46.

[43] Abella, introduction to Biderman, xii.

[44] NLC, MUS 43, Box 1, Programme, 21 May 1943.

Each of our concerts is intimately integrated with the life of our people of the entire world. We sing of their happiness and their suffering, of their battles against oppression whether political, economic, or social.

We feel keenly the bonds of friendship and comradeship that bind us to the rest of suffering humanity. When we sing of Lidice, we think of the Warsaw Ghetto, when we sing the Negro songs and spirituals, we think of our own people who died in the concentration camps of Europe. When we sing the Palestinian songs, we think of the battles of the Spanish Loyalists. When we sing the Yellow River Cantata we feel for and sympathize with the vast masses of the Chinese people who . . . are battling . . . for freedom and true democracy.

Yes, the Jewish Folk Choir stands definitely for freedom of the people and true democracy, and against fascism and world imperialism. And with our song we send our greetings and inspiration not only to our own fighters for freedom but to those of the entire world.[45]

The experience of racial oppression was also a key factor in leading many leftist Jews to embrace the political ideas of the Soviet Union – a country supposedly enforcing both economic and racial equality. The Soviet government had not only declared anti-Semitism a criminal offence, but established a Jewish autonomous region on its soil in the 1920s named Biro-Bidjan. As J. B. Salsberg, former leftist Canadian politician explains, these Soviet policies were a large factor in his decision to join the Communist Party. He and many others joined the movement "both as very conscious Jews and as also as very conscious socialists."[46] I have already demonstrated the choir's support for the Soviet Union seen in the amount of Russian works they performed. They also demonstrated support specifically for the Jewish autonomous region, Biro Bidjan, by performing two works celebrating the region. Long after the original enthusiasm for Biro-Bidjan had died and the project was struggling to survive, the choir programmed Schaefer's oratorio *Biro-Bidjan* (1946; excerpts in 1949), and the dance piece *Birobidjaner Freilechs* (1947).

A conscious Jewish identity can also be seen in the high percentage of repertoire which explores Jewish themes, history and culture. Famous Jewish authors and composers were frequently programmed by the choir, including the authors Edelstadt, Winchevsky, Peretz, and Feffer, the playwright Goldfaden, and the composers Helfman and Schaefer. Alongside shorter Jewish folk songs, sometimes longer Yiddish works were staged with costumes, lights, and dancing, following in the tradition of Yiddish musical theatre. Examples of large-scale productions put on by the choir include Schaefer's *Tzvei Brider* and *A Bunt Mit a Statchke,* Helfman's *Benjomin Hashlishi, Di Naye Hagode* and scenes from *Album Lieder* and Goldfaden's *The Goldfaden Spectacle.*

But celebrating Jewish themes was not restricted to folk songs and Yiddish repertoire. Many of the western art pieces, for example, dealt with Hebrew stories from the Bible, such as Mendelssohn's *Elijah,* and Schubert's *Miriam's Song of Triumph.* The

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[45] Ibid, Box 1, "The Choir's Message," Dr. J. S. Chaikoff, Clipping, [194?].
[46] Salsburg as quoted in Frager, 46.

latter is described in the programme notes as celebration of "the great victory of the Hebrew people over their oppressors."[47] Other pieces commemorating Jewish struggle against oppression include Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus* (performed in Yiddish translation) and excerpts from *Israel in Egypt*, and Verdi's "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves" from *Nabucco*. Contemporary works written on Jewish subjects include Max Helfman's *Di Naye Hagode*, which tells the story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, *Requiem Ebraico*, by Eric Zeisl, written in commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust, *Jewish Orchestral Suite* by Alexander Weprik, and *To the Jews of Poland* by Leon Wainer.

The Choir as a Voice in Canadian Multiculturalism

Finally, the choir saw their activities as not only leftist and Jewish, but also as Canadian. This is true particularly after 1939, when their name was changed from *Freiheit Gezans Ferein* to Toronto Jewish Folk Choir[48] and their programme booklets slowly changed from being primarily Yiddish to primarily English. During the war, the choir's anti-fascist and pro-Soviet beliefs were framed as part of the Canadian war effort. After the war, the choir began to refer to themselves frequently as a Canadian cultural institution and emphasized the fact that the majority of their members were Canadian-born.[49] Canadian folk songs in both French and English began to appear on their programmes alongside Jewish and other folk songs, and in one 1950 programme the choir included an essay on the history of Canadian folk song.

In the post-war period there are abundant programme texts which discuss the role that the choir could or should play in Canadian society, and what Canadian culture should look like. Likely this was related to the national soul-searching and self-evaluation that was taking place in Canada at the time, most notably in the research of the Massey Commission. Given the choir's belief in the brotherhood and equality of all people, it is not surprising that the vision for Canadian culture which they advocated was one of multiculturalism – a principle which they had themselves tried to promote in their diverse programming choices. Long before it was adopted as official cultural policy in 1971, the idea that Canada's identity would emerge as a hybrid of many cultures is clearly articulated by Emil Gartner in an essay which appeared in a 1947 programme entitled "Our Life, Our Art!" In it, he argues that the best way for a Jew to enhance Canadian culture is to be Jewish:

> The culture of a people could be best described as the sum total of all its achievements . . . . No, we Jews need not fear of being lesser Canadian by being better Jews; on the contrary, we shall be better Canadians by being conscious Jews. . . . We may contribute to Canadian culture something priceless and absolutely irreplaceable. . . . How could we in a better way show our love for Canada? . . . As Canadians we shall be able

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[47] NLC, MUS 43, Box 2, Programme, 28 January 1950.

[48] The exact date of the name change has not yet been established, but the archives indicate that the change occurred between the Spring of 1939 and the Fall of 1942. It was not 1934, as indicated in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*.

[49] NLC, MUS 43, Box 2, "The Role of the Canadian Artist," Max Burstyn, Programme, 3 June 1950. Burstyn writes "With a very small exception, the Jewish Folk Choir is now made up of Canadian-born men and women, boys and girls, whose parents come from many different nationalities."

to sing the great song of Canada that is yet to be written, and we shall have contributed to it, we may hope, a phrase or two.[50]

Within this multicultural context, the choir was understood as an important contribution to the fabric of Canada. As one member put it, "The Jewish people of Canada have immeasurably enriched Canadian culture through the Jewish Folk choir over its twenty-five years of singing. . . . It is a Jewish choir and a Canadian choir."[51]

The choir understood its political voice as a valuable contribution to Canadian culture as well. In a general sense, the choir's calls for peace, freedom and equality were framed in a Canadian context, as seen in Fagel Freeman-Gartners comment, "we shall make our voices heard in this Canada of ours, until we are assured that the threat of war will no longer exist."[52] In a more specific way, the choir's belief that contemporary cultural activity should be promoted was given a Canadian expression by their support of Canadian music and especially Canadian contemporary composers. I have already mentioned that they often programmed Canadian folk music. In addition to this, during the Gartner years they premiered works by both Weinzweig ("To the Lands Over Yonder") and Applebaum (*Newfoundland Songs*) and performed various works which had been orchestrated by Barbara Pentland.[53] The choir's programmes also often included essays on Canadian music by Canadian composers, usually lamenting the lack of support for contemporary works. Some examples include John Weinzweig's essay "Composer Meets Box Office," and Barbara Pentland's essay "Wanted – an Audience."[54] Emil Gartner also initiated a symposium series called "The Toronto Jewish Folk Choir Concert-Forum," the purpose of which was to discuss issues in contemporary music with Canadian composers, and listen to contemporary works. The first of this series took place in 1949 and included works by John Weinzweig and Murray Adaskin.

The End of an Era

This dynamic period of the choir's history came to an end in 1959. Anti-communist sentiment continued to rise throughout the 1950s, and those associated with leftist organizations were watched closely and sometimes blacklisted, creating a climate of severe tension.[55] When, in 1956, the harsh details of Stalin's leadership were exposed and it was revealed that anti-Semitism had continued in the Soviet Union there was severe disillusionment and upheaval within the leftist Jewish community. The parent organization of the choir, the UJPO, became wracked with in-fighting and eventually split in 1959.[56] These tensions were mirrored in the choir. According to long-time member of the choir, Ben Shek, it too nearly collapsed during this period, shrinking from over 100 members to only 15 or 16.[57] Emil Gartner stepped down in 1959 and began to work at

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[50] Ibid, Box 2, "Our Life, Our Art!," Emil Gartner, Programme, 25 March 1947.

[51] Ibid, Box 2, "The Source of Its Strength," John Stewart, Programme, 3 June 1950.

[52] Ibid, Box 2, "In Truth, a Cultural Institution," Fagel Freeman-Gartner, 3 June 1950.

[53] These included "Kol Nidrie," *Birobidjaner Freilichs*, and *Yellow River Cantata*, all performed between 1945 and 1949. It is unclear whether Pentland was commissioned by the choir to write orchestrations of these works, but it seems likely.

[54] NLC, MUS 43, Box 2, Programme, 25 March 1947; idem 3 June 1950.

[55] For personal accounts of Canada's blacklist era, see Len Scher, *The Un-Canadians: True Stories of the Blacklist Era* (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1992).

[56] Biderman, 178-184.

[57] Ben Shek, interview with author, April 19, 2002.

the Beth Sholem and Holy Blossom Synagogues in Toronto.[58] Although the choir did not collapse (and, in fact, continues to this day), after this tumultuous period the activities of the choir dropped considerably and its political timbre significantly changed.

I have provided here only a brief outline of some of the overlapping and interrelated aspects of identity at work in the repertoire used by the choir during the Gartner period. More than adding to the interest and complexity of the choir's history, I believe their use of repertoire may prove to be an extremely rich source for a more theoretical discussion about the use of music and musical aesthetics in the construction of identity. The texts in which the choir discusses their repertoire choices and explains how their music should be understood and used can certainly be seen as an example of the flexibility and subjectivity of musical meanings. These texts show, in the words of Mark Slobin, that to some extent "it isn't how the music *sounds*, but how it can be *thought*, that counts."[59]

While the Gartner years of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir ended in conflict and disillusionment, this does not take away from their accomplishments during this period. For a choir made up of leftist Jews – an ethnic minority outside the political mainstream – to occupy such a significant part of the cultural stage in Toronto between 1939 and 1959 is a testament to the community's vigilant idealism and activistic spirit. Their efforts did indeed contribute "a phrase or two" to the song of Canada's musical history.

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[58] Ben Shek, letter to author, 8 August 2002. Gartner died tragically the next year, in 1960.

[59] Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hannover & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) ix.

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