

Pamela Hickman's Concert Critique Blog

Thursday, December 23, 2010

An evening of Yiddish and European Jewish music at Hebrew Union College

The third event of the 2010-2011 season of “Music at the College with the Atar Trio”, a series of concerts and cultural encounters at Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem, under the direction of Ofer Shelley, was a concert of Yiddish songs and works by European Jewish composers on December 9th 2010. Performing were musicologist and cantor Professor Eliyahu Schleifer, pianist Aya Schleifer, soprano Michal Okon, violinist Tanya Beltser and pianist Ofer Shelley. Ofer Shelley has produced several programs focusing on Jewish music.

In the spirit of Chanukah (Feast of Lights) Eli and Aya Schleifer opened with some well-known Chanukah songs sung in Hebrew and Yiddish.

Russian composer Alexander Krein (1883-1951) was a member of the National Jewish Movement, a group of writers, artists and musicians seeking to preserve and revive Jewish culture during the Soviet regime. Michal Okon, accompanied by Ofer Shelley, performed two of Krein’s Yiddish Songs for voice and piano opus 49 (1937). The harmonies and sad melodies pervading these arrangements of traditional Jewish folk songs create the atmosphere of Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

Shelley and Beltser performed composer and violinist Joseph Achron’s Dance Improvisations on a Hebrew Folksong opus 37 (1914). Born in 1886, Achron, in contact with the Jewish Folk Art Society, composed some 100 works, most of which are based on Jewish folklore. He spent World War I in Russia and immigrated to the USA in 1925, composing music for Yiddish theatre in New York. His compositions are now housed at Tel Aviv University. The artists gave a spirited reading of this entertaining piece which quotes melodic fragments of the song “O Chanukah, o Chanukah”, rhythmic displacement, uses the full ranges of the instruments, overtones on the violin, etc. The two artists performed Achron’s “Hebrew Melody” for violin and piano opus 35 (1911), also based on traditional Jewish melodies, a piece that was much performed by Jascha Heifitz. Somber and reflective, the work suggests sighs and weeping, later becoming more optimistic, frenzied and virtuosic in the middle section. Beltser and Shelley perform it convincingly, its imaginative piano part effective against the songful, haunting melodies.

The Atar Trio wrote the arrangements of three Kurt Weill (1900-1950) songs performed by Okon, Beltser and Shelley, beginning with the haunting, bitter reminder of war in the “Ballad of the Soldier’s Wife” (1942) to German lyrics of Berthold Brecht. The song tells

of what the soldier has sent his wife from different cities he has been in – three pairs of high-heeled shoes from Prague, a fur collar from Oslo, a hat from Amsterdam, lace from Brussels, a silk gown from Paris, an embroidered shirt from Bucharest and a widow's veil from Russia. Having fled from Nazi German, Weill composed some cabaret songs in Paris. Okon communicated the anger, heartbreak, sorrow and ambivalence of the situation of “Je ne t'aime pas” (1934) (text: Maurice Magre), the tempo of the song tempered by the range of emotions of the text. Kurt Weill composed “Youkali: Tango Habanera” (Havana-style tango) in 1934 as incidental music for the play “Marie Galante”. Lyrics were added in 1946 by Roger Fernay. Youkali is an idyllic island, a place of happiness that will never exist. Okon, often heard performing music from South America, is at home with the rich tango rhythms, Beltser's violin part adding color and an element of nostalgia.

Eli and Aya Schleifer then performed three songs in Yiddish. The first, “Lomir alle Zingen” (Let us all sing) based on a Sabbath song, is a dialogue in which a child asks about various foods. The father's answers explain the difference between the rich and the poor according to their diet. Schleifer plays the two characters sympathetically, the father's final answer being that poor people eat “gehakte tzores” (chopped troubles). Moshe Michael Milner (1886-1953) was a member of the St Petersburg Jewish Folk Music Society. His song “In Cheder” is a vignette in which a teacher in a cheder (elementary school for orthodox boys) endeavors to teach the alphabet to a small child who is slow to grasp. The teacher, initially very patient, finally gives up, claiming it is anyway more important to study Torah. A fine piece for both singer and pianist, it is a reminder that these Yiddish songs include a strong theatrical element. “A Chassene in Birobidzan” (A Birobidzan Wedding) (lyrics Itzik Feffer, music Lev Yampolsky) paints a musical picture of a wedding in Russia at a time when Jewish culture still flourished there. A rich verbal and musical canvas, it includes Chasidic wedding dance melodies. The audience enjoyed these vivid musical scenes of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, with Eli Schleifer's humor and articulacy and Aya Schleifer's fine accompanying enriching each work.

Michal Okon performed three Yiddish song arrangements by Ofer Shelley. In “Unter Deine Weisse Stern” (Under your white star) (lyrics Abraham Sutskever, music Abraham Brodna) Shelley's minimal, evocative accompaniment provides a nostalgic backing for the song. In the lullaby “Rozhinkes mit Mandeln” (Sultanas with almonds) Tanya Beltser's expressive playing adds much to Okon's dynamically varied and detailed performance. Yiddish humor creeps back into “The Violin”: Michal Okon plays the role of the proud mother of a young beginning violin pupil, with Tanya Beltser as the child whose playing is far from brilliant. A whimsical performance!

Leibu Levin (1914-1983), the Czernowitz-born Yiddish actor, singer and composer, was a true troubadour of Yiddish literature. He wrote the words and music to “Main Haylike kamee” (My sacred cameo). Eli and Aya Schleifer performed a beautiful arrangement of this sad song. “Mein Shtetele Belz” (My Little Town Belz), to words by Jacob Jacobs, was composed in 1932 by Alexander Olshanetsky (1892-1946) for the play “Song of the

Ghetto". This is another emotional Yiddish song, fraught with nostalgic memories. Eli Schleifer gave a moving performance of it. It reminisces about Belz, in Bessarabia:

'Tell me old man; tell me quickly because I want to know everything now! How does the little house look which used to sparkle with lights? Does the little tree grow which I planted long ago? Belz, my little town! The little house where I spent my childhood! The poor little room where I used to laugh with other children! Every Shabbos I would run to the riverbank to play with other children under a little green tree....Belz, where I had so many beautiful dreams...'

Aharon Lebedeff (1873-1960), one of the most exuberant, versatile and original personalities in Yiddish musical comedy, was known for his improvisations, his clowning and dancing. His singing was a combination of gorgeous, flowing, lyrical lines, dizzying facility and rapidity of diction. "Roumania, Roumania", typical of Yiddish theatre of the time, which thrived on tales of traditional life based more on romance than on reality, tells of the once "sweet and fine" country Romania, its wines and food delicacies. Eli Schleifer presents the piece in all its culinary detail and joy, its rhythmic nonsense syllables adding to the song's joyousness. Michal Okon and Eli Schleifer performed "What Will Happen When the Messiah Arrives, the Great Banquet", a Yiddish folk song arranged by Leon Zeitlin and Ossip Proktor (members of the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music). A pleasingly balanced duet and blend of voices and musical gestures, the singers present the menu and the guest list of all the "who's who" from biblical times. The descriptive piano accompaniment contributes effects and detail to the scene.

Due to the strong theatrical elements of the songs, the works presented throughout the evening lent themselves especially well to live performance. The artists presented an interesting program, involving the audience in the inevitable mix of joy and melancholy inherent in European Jewish music of the first half of the 20th century.

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