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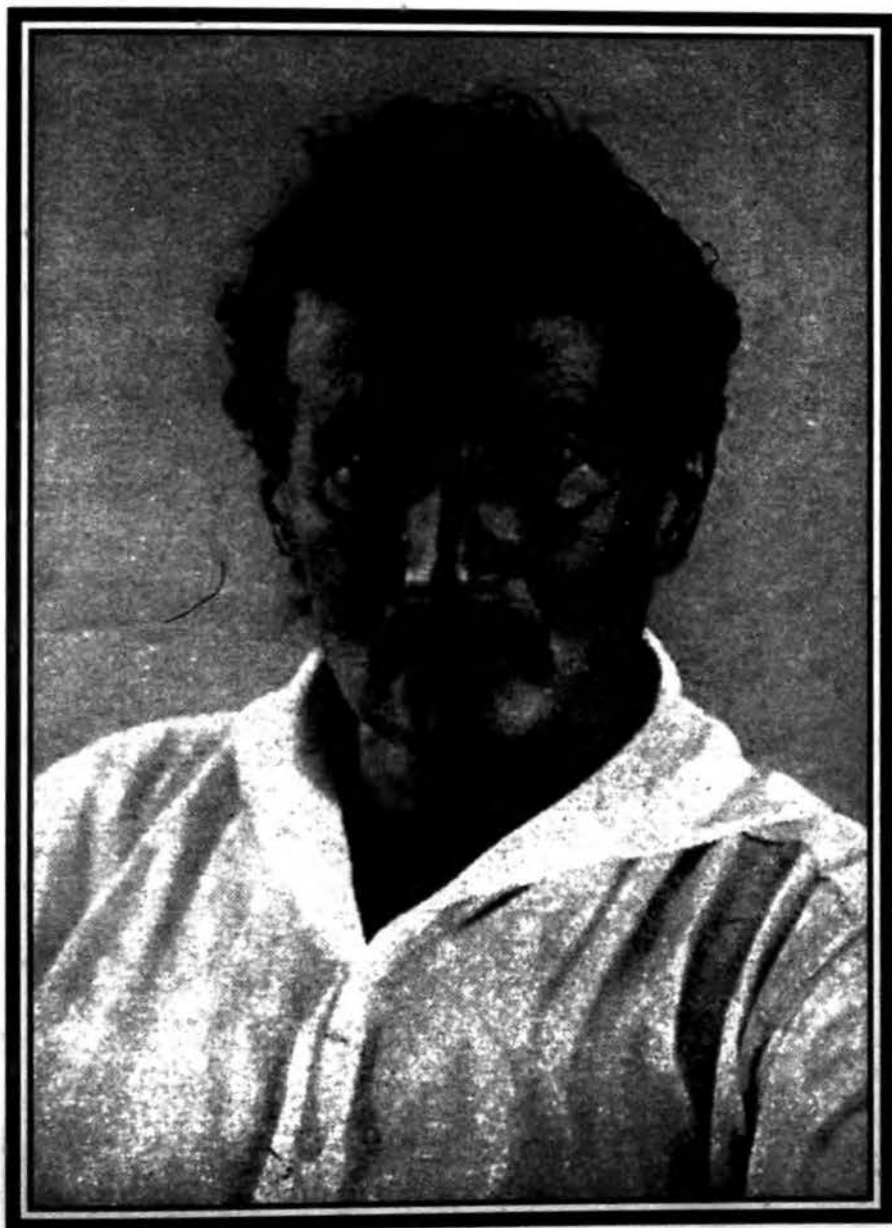
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**JOEL ENGEL: PIONEER OF JEWISH ART MUSIC**  
**JONATHAN GRANT**

Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Master of Sacred Music Degree

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
School of Sacred Music  
New York, New York

1994  
Advisors: Joyce Rosenzweig, Rabbi Geoffrey Goldberg



***Joel Engel***  
1868 - 1927

To the memory of my beloved mother,

Rita Niemy Grant, z"l

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
PREFACE.....	1
EARLY YEARS.....	3
ACTIVITIES IN RUSSIA: ENGEL'S ROLE IN THE AWAKENING OF JEWISH ART MUSIC.....	5
The First Evening of Jewish Art Music	
The Society for Jewish Folk Music and the St. Petersburg School	
THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION, BERLIN AND THE ROAD TO PALESTINE.....	20
ACTIVITIES IN PALESTINE.....	23
SONGS OF JOEL ENGEL: AN ANALYSIS.....	27
<i>Osso Boiker</i>	
<i>Mare</i>	
<i>Omrin Yeshnah Eretz</i>	
<i>Shoshanat Playim</i>	
<i>Children's Songs</i>	
<i>Sh'nei Michtavim</i>	
CONCLUSION.....	43
SOURCES CONSULTED.....	44

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## PREFACE

Formal music based on Jewish folk traditions and composed by Jewish musicians for professional performance barely existed one hundred years ago. Not that famous Jewish composers did not exist; the works of Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791 - 1864) and Jacques Offenbach (1819 - 1880), for example, are still widely performed and enjoy great acclaim. But the works of these men, whether symphonic or operatic, had little Jewish flavor or expression of Jewish experience. Jews certainly possessed non-liturgical art music, but the music they had was not for show or notation; its home was the *shtetl*.

Jewish composers in Russia at the turn of this century began refashioning folk melodies and themes of the *shtetl* into compositions for the concert hall. The Jewish musical renaissance of the late 1800's and early 1900's is the story of musicians who recognized the musical wealth of their own people and who transformed folk expression into profound and moving artistic compositions. Recognizing the beauty of their heritage, they set themselves to the task of writing in a Jewish idiom which was previously unique to the ghetto. They were determined to bring these folk-based compositions to a worldwide secular audience.

Joel Engel pioneered this Jewish musical renaissance. As a collector and annotator of Jewish folklore, as an ethnomusicologist, music critic and publicist, and as a composer who based his compositions on the folk traditions of Eastern Europe, Joel Engel was the

motivating force behind the creation of a Jewish national school of composition. In the following pages, we will meet the man, explore some of his music, and gain an understanding of how he and his followers were able to eventually bring Jewish music out of the *shtetl* and onto the concert stages of the world.

## EARLY YEARS

Joel (Julius) Engel was born in the small Ukrainian town of Berdyansk, in the region of Tabriya on the Crimean Peninsula, in 1868. The Crimean Peninsula, being outside the Pale of Settlement<sup>1</sup>, had a very small, mostly assimilated Jewish population. His father was a successful merchant and amateur guitarist who exposed Joel and his brother Gregory to music at a young age. As a result of restrictive enrollment quotas placed on Jews, the young Engel was fortunate to graduate from the local "gymnasium," an eight-year combination of grammar and high school, at age seventeen. Following high school, he studied law in Kiev and Charkov, receiving his law degree in 1892.

While a student of law, Engel, who was a pianist, continued his studies of music and began to exhibit talent as a composer. He was able to show some small pieces to Tchaikovsky, and the venerable composer, who was in Kharkov for a tour, encouraged Engel to come to Moscow to study at the Imperial Conservatory. He entered the Conservatory, and was privileged to study composition with Arensky, Ippolitov-Ivanov, and Serge Tanayev; Tanayev having been the teacher of an impressive list of Russian

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<sup>1</sup>Territory within the borders of czarist Russia wherein the residence of Jews was legally authorized. The Pale covered an area of roughly 1,000,000 square kilometers from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The census of 1897 showed 4,899,300 Jews lived there, forming 94% of the total Jewish population of Russia and 11.6% of the general population of this area. (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*). *Jewish Music Forum* 7 and 8 (December 1947-48): 33.

composers including Scriabin, Sabaneyev and many others. While at the conservatory, Engel made his first attempt at creating Jewish art music based on folk tunes, collaborating with some friends to produce the Purim opera, Esther, in 1894.

Following graduation in 1897, he married Antonia Heifetz, herself a pianist, and subsequently began his journalistic career as music critic for the highly respected publication *Russkiya Vedemostii*, a position he held until 1918. Engel's involvement in varied aspects of Russian musical culture was profound; he edited the music section of A. Granat's Encyclopaedic Dictionary, translated Reimann's musical dictionary Musiclexicon from German to Russian, published several opera guides, and added some 800 essays on Russian (non-Jewish) music. Having been raised in a non-Jewish, completely Russian environment, "it is nothing short of a miracle that a man brought up, living and acting in a perfectly assimilated Russian milieu has emerged as a leader [of] a Jewish national movement in music."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Jacob Weinberg, "Joel Engel, A Pioneer in Jewish Musical Renaissance (Personal Recollections, 1902-1927)," The Jewish Music Forum 7 and 8 (December 1947-48): 33.

## ACTIVITIES IN RUSSIA: ENGEL'S ROLE IN THE AWAKENING OF JEWISH ART MUSIC

Although Engel's work as music critic and editor gives him a significant place in the history of Russian music, his true greatness lies in the fact that he, more than any other Jewish composer active at the turn of the twentieth century, brought about a fundamental change in attitude towards the idea of Jewish art music. He was one of the first in the history of Jewish music to recognize not only the beauty, but also the inherent value of Jewish folk tunes as a basis for artistic compositions suitable for the salons and concert halls of large cities in secular Russia. Before Engel, "Jewish composers of the period did not recognize Jewish music written before their own time, nor did they believe in the possibility of its revival."<sup>3</sup> Throughout his adult life, Engel unflaggingly dedicated himself to the project of renewing Jewish music.

Given the fact that Engel was raised in the secular world, was a model of the enlightened followers of the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement, and was already a greatly respected member of the Russian intelligentsia, how did he come to be so ardently interested in pursuing Jewish music? Although Engel was exposed to Jewish folk music at an early age through his father, an important turning point in Engel's life apparently came

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<sup>3</sup>Menasheh Ravina, *Joel Engel V'hamusikah Hay'hudit* (Tel Aviv: *Hamosad L'musikah Ha'am*, 1947), 30. Trans. Carol Sutherland.

in 1897 after meeting the great Russian music and art critic, Vladimir Stasov.<sup>4</sup> In the following quote, Jacob Weinberg hyperbolically recounts a conversation in which Engel described how this one meeting transformed him into a faithful representative of Jewish music.

And he [Engel] told me of the remarkable episode, a fascinating story indeed, which caused that decisive turn of his life into a new path. It was...when the young Russian music critic Engel met a friend of his, the sculptor Antokolsky for the purpose of introducing Engel to the eminent Vladimir Stasov...[Stasov] started a vigorous attack on both as Jews who used Russian first names instead of their own Hebrew ones... "I simply cannot understand it. Where is your national pride of being a Jew?"...So yelled the giant Stasov as if in a delirium of ecstasy.

The young Engel was overwhelmed, bewildered... His words struck Engel's imagination like lightning, and the Jew awoke in him. This was indeed the greatest moment in Engel's life, as well as a big event for the whole of Israel. For this was the memorable night when Jewish art-music was born.<sup>5</sup>

Weinberg continues to explain that barely two months after this meeting with Stasov, Engel spent the summer travelling through towns inside the Pale of Settlement in order to listen to and transcribe "loads of Jewish musical folklore"<sup>6</sup> which he would later edit, harmonize and eventually publish as the first collection of Jewish songs.<sup>7</sup>

Engel was certainly not, however, the only scholar who made research expeditions of this kind into the *shtetles* of Western Russia. In 1898, Saul Ginsburg<sup>8</sup> and

<sup>4</sup>Stasov (1824-1906), Russian art critic and historian, wrote on many artistic and literary subjects and is known for his indispensable biographies of chief Russian composers. His influence on contemporary Russian art was immense. (*Grove's Dictionary of Music*).

<sup>5</sup>Jacob Weinberg, "Joel Engel," 34-35.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>7</sup>Joel Engel, *First Album of Ten Jewish Folksongs*, (Moscow: Verlag Engel, 1905)

<sup>8</sup>Born in Minsk, 1866. Wrote critical articles, columns and edited various Russian-Jewish journals. Served as professor of Jewish History at the Jewish Institute in Leningrad. Came to the United States in 1932 and lived in New York until his death in 1940.

Pesach Marek<sup>9</sup> began dedicating themselves to the enormous task of researching the history of the Jews in Russia. Collecting Jewish folk songs would be the cornerstone of their work, having published notices encouraging the submission of examples from all parts of the country. As a result of their effort, much poetry and music was gathered and Engel was put in charge of editing the musical examples. In 1901, Ginsburg and Marek published their landmark edition Jewish Folksongs in Russia which contained over three hundred pages of folk poetry. Only words were published; it would be another four years before Engel would publish his First Album of Jewish Folksongs. Although others were involved in the collection of Jewish folk songs, most notably Issac Leib (I.L.) Peretz<sup>10</sup> and Shalom Alechem<sup>11</sup>, no one pursued the task with the same depth and extent as Ginsburg and Marek.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of the collaboration between Marek and Engel, the two decided to present the first concert/lecture ever given on Jewish music. The monumental event took place in November, 1900, at the Moscow Polytechnical Museum and was sponsored by the

<sup>9</sup>Born in Zhadov, Lithuania in 1862. An accountant by profession, he devoted his free time to historical studies and writings. One of the founders of the Moscow chapter of *B'nei Zion*. He died in Saratov, in the Eastern portion of Russia in 1920.

<sup>10</sup>I.L. Peretz (1852 - 1915), Yiddish and Hebrew poet and author. One of the founders of modern Yiddish literature and important figure in Hebrew literature. In 1926, Engel wrote the incidental music to four short Peretz plays produced by the *Ohel* theater in Tel Aviv: *Mekublin*, *Ahad Hak'yurah*, *Sh'ma Yisrael*, and *Sefurei Hal'vanah*. (Weisser, Jewish Musical Renaissance).

<sup>11</sup>Pen name for Shalom Rabinovitz (1859 - 1916), Yiddish author and humorist. Shalom, Peretz and Mendele Mocher Seforim are considered founders of Yiddish literature. (Encyclopaedia Judaica).

<sup>12</sup>Albert Weisser, The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, Inc, 1954), 26ff.

Society for Natural Science and Anthropology. The importance of this evening cannot be overestimated for it generated an interest in Jewish art music which would eventually lead to the formation of the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St. Petersburg in 1908. This organization gave rise to an entire group of composers who based their work on the folk traditions of Eastern European Jewish communities. These composers became known as the "St. Petersburg School".

### The First Evening of Jewish Art Music

The following is a direct translation of the full text of an article written by Joel Engel twenty-five years after the historic "first evening" concert/lecture. Originally published in *Theatron V'amanuth* in April, 1925, the article recounts the evening itself, subsequent concerts, and lends very important biographical background information which further shows how Engel was transformed from a Russian intellectual into a pioneering Jewish musician. To the best of my knowledge, the article has never appeared in English and therefore bares quoting in full.

We have to recount what took place. Indeed, as now appears, it was a historic festive occasion: the first appearance of Jewish music. All manner of conclusions may be drawn from this, but the event must be recalled and related, and if this is not done now, when will it be done? The event took place twenty-five years ago, and who but myself - who played a major role - has a duty to relate it? Since my youth I had been interested in Jewish music. My father played the guitar excellently (without music, just "by ear"), and this was his means of diversion in the evenings, when the day's work was done. Among the melodies he used to play were Jewish folk tunes, and sometimes he would play his own multiple variations on these melodies. He passed on to me, very much later, a not inconsiderable number of Jewish folk melodies.

I made my first attempt at arranging these melodies in the opera *Esther*, which played in Moscow on Purim, 1894, shortly after I was accepted into the conservatory of music there. We produced [the performance and by "we" I mean] the group from the Zacharievka Circle (named for the furnished rooms in the home of Professor Zecharian) of

which I wrote in the Book of Remembrance for A.Z. Idelsohn.

I wrote the libretto myself in Russian, from the Book of Esther. In order to speed things up, three people were in charge of the music: I composed two acts, while my friends from the Philharmonic Conservatory, A. Speigal and Z. Cohen, composed one act each. Within five weeks we had finished the whole business of preparation and production. The opera contained not only large solo parts, ensembles and choirs, but also a four-hand accompaniment.

Esther raised the prestige of Jewish folk music in our circle, but clear thoughts of the great international future of Jewish music had not so far occurred to me - or to any one of us. Quite simply: I liked the Jewish melodies very much, and it was not because I am Jewish myself that I noted them down and arranged them. The process operated in reverse: the more I worked on the melodies and came to love them, the more Jewish I became. The Zacharievka Circle played an important role here. Anyone who joined the circle became "Judaized" to a greater or lesser extent, so strong was the Jewish pulse of the group and of those who joined it. [The footnote to this sentence reads: In Livontin's novel, Shimon of Etzion, the circle is described in detail in the play Esther.] Of these I must mention first those who are no longer among the living: A. Idelsohn, the outstanding journalist who later edited the *Razsviet*; P. Marek, later a talented researcher of the Jewish past and present; G. Lunz, later famous as a social democrat and a Bolshevik; Dr. Ullenstein; and finally Yichiel Chalinov, the well-known Zionist activist. And those who are counted among the living: Dr. R. Lunz, Dr. Y. Brotzkos, the Wachmann family, the singer Altschuler and others. At the Zacharievka meetings, whether in any one of the furnished rooms, or in one of the family homes, a Yiddish word was always to be heard. The Zacharievka group was soon disbanded, but the friendships were kept-up, and some have persisted over a lifetime. I continued to meet Idelsohn and Marek even after I had finished my studies at the conservatory, during the period when I took part in the *Russkiya Vedemostii*. Once they both came together [to see me] and Marek made the following suggestion: as the editors of *Voshod* were about to issue a collection of Jewish folk songs collected by themselves and by S. Grinsburg (from Petersburg), it might be a good idea to publish the melodies which sometimes accompanied the songs. I agreed, and the matter was successfully put in hand. However, the notations had for the most part been made by an unskilled hand, and were in some places indecipherable. To publish on the basis of such notations was impossible, even though the material was well-known and served as melodies for singing. And since I had added to this new material everything I had previously collected, particularly melodies without words, klezmer melodies and tunes with texts, I realized it would be a good idea to study all this [material] and share my ideas with someone else. I had plenty to show...

This being the case, we decided, Marek and I, to organize an evening [literally public party/gala/event] of Jewish popular music. Marek would lecture on the text and content of folk song, while I would speak on the musical aspect. Afterwards a live musical demonstration would be given [to illustrate what we had said].

But the business was more difficult than we had imagined. At this period it was impossible to obtain a license from the great prince Sergei Alexandrovich to hold a public event of this type. Special stratagems were required in order to make any sort of contact with the prince, and this could

only be done through important people who had no desire to hear about Jewish folk song. So what was to be done? It was only with the help of an institution which is in no way Jewish that we made our way out of this difficulty; it is thanks to the Imperial Society for Lovers of the Natural Sciences, Anthropology and Ethnography, affiliated with the University in Moscow [that the event was able to take place]. This society had since the eighteenth century the right to hold its public events without a police license. Professor Anuzin, the well-known Russian geographer, and one of the editors of *Russkiya Vyedomostii* was, I think, at the time vice-president of the society. With his help, and the help of others, we managed to sort the matter out.

To the ethnographic department was affiliated a musical committee headed by Professor Yanchuk. This committee held from time to time events devoted not only to every branch of Russian folk music, but also to the folk songs of all the other nationalities living in Russia, such as Georgian, Armenian, Ezgin, Oset, Latvian, Lithuanian, Finnish, Estonian, Polish, Moldavian, Yakutes, Borites, Tatar, Khirghiz, Sart, etc. But the voice of Jewish folk song had not so far been heard. They immediately showed an interest, despite their attitude of disbelief: "How can this be? Do Jews have folk songs, too? Hmm, let's hear [them]." And so we began to make ready.

Marek prepared a comprehensive lecture which was later published (in Russian) in Marek and Ginsburg's collection of Popular Jewish Songs. My own lecture was very short, I spoke for less than a quarter of an hour; it was hard to talk about music to a [non-professional] audience for longer than that. Also, the main part of my duties lay in selecting the material, adapting it and arranging for it to be performed.

I tried to play the songs in such a way as to encompass as many aspects of Jewish life as possible. Among them were melodies without words and instrumental pieces. I remember they played: *Avraham, Avraham; As ich Welt hehet; Das Kind Liegt in Wiegele; Soll ich Waren a Rav; Wie Wer Singt; Geweld ze Brider; Die Sheyne Rachele*. Among the instrumental pieces were *Freyliches, Chabi Yider Nigun* and others. All these (most were later published) I arranged myself, that is to say, I gave them form, I arranged harmonies, and added an accompaniment - that is to say, I made them more accessible to our generation. But I did not allow myself to change a single note of the original melody, a fact I did not refrain from mentioning with pride in my lecture.

Today my views on the matter are more liberal. Every popular musician [who plays the music of his own people] assumes he has the right to introduce into a folk melody whatever changes seem desirable to him - and he is right: is not he also molded from the same clay as the anonymous musician who composed the melody?

The performers were, for the most part, those same Zacharievkans who had previously sung in *Esther*: R. Spiegel (who had played *Esther*), Yaakov Losiev (who had played *Ahasuerus*). They sang partly in Russian, partly in the original language. Both were fine singers, particularly Spiegel who had a soprano voice which, though not strong, was light, flexible and full of charm. Her performance was deep and subtle. Later she became well known, and died shortly afterwards while still in her prime. Losiev (later the chazzan in the Poliakov Synagogue) had a sensitive bass. I believe he still teaches in Moscow. Our violinist was L. [no last name given] who studied with me at the Conservatory. The [other] players considered him a

lost cause, as he was already playing in eating houses at the time. But, firstly, he was a Jew; secondly, he was interested in the whole idea - and, most important of all - he demanded no payment for taking part. Since we ourselves were receiving no wages, we could pay no others. His playing was a little gypsyish (his countenance and nature reinforced this impression) but it had great impetus and lustre. The accompanists were: myself (with ease) and the pianist Spiegel (with some little difficulty), who was also a long-term Zecharievkan and the brother of the female soloist.

The event took place in November, 1900. I do not recall the precise details, and I lost the original program in the Revolution. The small hall of the Polytechnic Museum where the event was held, which holds about 250 people, was completely full. Entrance, as the papers had announced, was free of charge. Those unable to find places in the hall remained standing in the nearby corridors. The audience, as at all "meetings" of this kind, was composed entirely of students, male and female. There were a considerable number of Jews present, though I doubt if these made up even one-quarter of the audience. In front of the stage, at a long green table, sat several of the most respected members of the Society. Among them I recall: Professor Grozinski, later - and still, I believe - president of the Society of Lovers of Russian Literature, the oldest Society in Russia; Professor Anotchin; Professor Yantchuk; Professor Bogdanov and others. As the occasion was called a "public meeting", it opened with a discussion of sundry matters. There was also a brief lecture from Arkov on his trip on the White Sea, whence we moved south to the Pale of Jewish Settlement...after the interval, Marek read his lecture. Its content was most interesting, and the talk was well constructed, though the reading in itself was weak from a technical point of view, and exhausted the listeners. The audience was frankly terrified of me, as they imagined that they were in for an hour's heavy going with me, too. But when I announced that my reading would last less than fifteen minutes, and would be followed by a musical performance, they immediately cheered up, and once the playing started a warm atmosphere reigned in the hall. This was obvious from the start, and grew with every passing minute. After *Wie Wir Zingt*, thunderous applause was heard and, truly, this little melody has become a unique artistic masterpiece of musical ethnography: two or three lines draw instant musical portraits of the Jew, the Gypsy, and the Russian. Here, at the Ethnography Society meeting, its effect was particularly strong. We repeated the melody a second time, and even, I am willing to believe, a third time also. The lullaby *Die Shayne Ruchale*, sung, like the rest of the songs, in the most tasteful manner, also made a great impression, as did the violin playing. There were a great many encores, and even more demands for them.

None of us had hoped for such a success. The Jewish members of the audience, among them a group of long-time Zachariievkans, were particularly enthusiastic. Just imagine hearing all those folk songs - and so well executed; and in public, before the eyes of the world - in those difficult times when reactionary forces raged outside like the [forces of] darkness, while indoors the rebellious fires of independent national self-awareness were powerfully kindled. But justice must also be done to the non-Jews. They, too, listened intently, applauded and were clearly impressed. Not a few among the audience - even among the professors present - came up [to us] afterwards, thanked [us] and expressed their amazement that the Jews, too, possessed folk songs - and such beautiful ones. I recall the words of Professor Grozinski, the best versed in musical matters of all those at the

Society members' table (among other things, he wrote a book on the composer Glinka). His words are engraved upon my memory, simply because they accorded so well with the ideas I was already nurturing with regard to the future of Jewish music. He said: "I had always imagined that the Jews, who have contributed so much to the world of music, must have a national music [of their own]. And now I see that it truly exists. Everything we have heard here is most interesting, and some of it is excellent and wonderful. In what way is the melody of *Freyliches* inferior to the Spanish dances of Sarrasata which the whole world knows? All Sarrasata did was to compose with greater virtuosity, but in this genre his melody is not superior [to what we have just heard]. How, after all [we have heard] can one not believe that Jews will continue to contribute to music something new and fresh of their own?" So said a Russian intellectual, in a Russian city, at the meeting of a Russian society, twenty-five years ago. Is this not amazing? Particularly when we recall how few Jewish intellectuals were at the time - and here I reveal a secret: the same is true today - capable of regarding the question with simplicity and integrity.

Several months later (Pesach, 1901) the occasion was repeated in St. Petersburg, with a slightly different program - this time in completely different surroundings. This time the event was held in a wealthy private home (at

H. Trak's), for an entrance fee (and not a small one, by the way) to be contributed to the poverty-stricken Jewish agricultural settlements. Tickets were distributed to people's homes. This time too the hall (an elegant art gallery) was full to capacity - 150 people or more. Here, of course, the audience was entirely different from that in Moscow. Young students were among the those present, but they were separate, in nearby rooms. The speaker this time was S. Ginsburg, but he gave nothing longer than an opening speech. I too spoke for five minutes, then [the musicians] played.

Of those who took part I still remember the [woman] singer Feinberg, another female singer and the tenor Kon, a student at the Conservatory. But the most exciting participant [literally "the leaven in the dough"] in the evening was the famous Tartakov, in those days the idol of the Petersburg audience, and of the Jewish audience in particular. He had a magnificent baritone voice and was a splendid artist. He was a "meshumad" - without this it was hard for an Israelite to reach the Imperial stage. [The footnote to this sentence reads: A comment is appropriate here: Zalman Raysin's Jewish Lexicon states that Engel renounced the opportunity [to become] a professor at the Royal Conservatory, because the offer was conditional upon his changing his religion.]

The Jewish songs awoke in him an enthusiasm unsurmised even by himself, and he was so overwhelmed with emotion. I remember the moment he came into the artists' room after performing *Das Kind Liegt in Wiegele*: his face [flushed with] enthusiasm and excitement, his eyes deep-set, damp, burning. "Can you imagine? I hardly had the strength...I almost burst into tears, everything turned over inside me..." No wonder, then, that the "weighty", doubtful audience which did not at first know quite how to relate to Jewish song, later became enthusiastic and applauded. Since then folk songs, arranged by myself, have always had their place in the concerts of the Musical Ethnographical Committee, where I had begun to work diligently. From here these songs made their way also to the major Jewish charity concerts. The songs were performed infrequently, always singly, never all at once, since the organizers of these concerts had for a long time

treated Jewish song with distrust. The late Chelinov did a great deal for Jewish [folk] music.

After the success of the Jewish concerts in Moscow, invitations came from the provincial towns, too (Rostov on the Don, Yekaterinoslav, Vilna, and others). The hearts of young students of music in Petersburg warmed [to the music], and in 1908 the renowned Jewish Folk Music Society was founded. The moving spirit behind this society was the pianist Nisvitsky (now known throughout *Eretz Yisrael* as Avi-Leah). At the time he was still a pupil at the Conservatory, and worked hard for the Society which he later left only to go abroad. The composer S. Rozovsky, who now lives in Israel, played an active and important role in founding the Society and working in it. The Society attracted all the musical youth of Petersburg, and very soon became the working center for the study and arrangement of Jewish music.

It must not be forgotten that at that period it was almost impossible for a Jew to be accepted into the Conservatory in Moscow. Only those who had right of residence were allowed to sit the exam - and how could [a residence permit] be obtained? I myself, for example, was for a long time the only Jew in the composition section in Moscow, and I reached the Conservatory thanks only to the fact that I had previously completed [studies at the] University, which gave me the right to reside in Moscow. But in Petersburg things were completely different. Thanks to the courageous position on the matter adopted by Glasinov, together with Rimsky-Korsakov, Jews, too, were accepted into the Conservatory on the basis of their talents and prior preparation. And once they had been accepted they were given right of residence. As a result, gifted Jewish youth came to be concentrated in Petersburg. When the first spark of national artistic awareness was kindled in these young people, they responded with warmth and enthusiasm. Only then did it become possible to undertake comprehensive, widespread work in the field of Jewish music.

The Petersburg Society invited me from Moscow to attend its big concert in 1909, in the small hall of the Conservatory. Solo, duet and ensemble vocal works were performed, together with solo and instrumental ensemble works - all Jewish folk songs arranged by myself. I opened the concert with a talk. The performers were very good. All were from the youth of the Conservatory.

The hall was full. Representatives of all the newspapers were present (including non-Jewish [press]) who reviewed [the concert] most favorably. In short: it was a great success - in the material sense as well - and provided a sound basis for the development of the young Society.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>As appears in Menasheh Ravina, *Joel Engel*, 38-45. Trans. by Carol Sutherland, Jerusalem, 1993.

The Society for Jewish Folk Music and the  
St. Petersburg School

The preceding article amply illustrates the tremendous importance of the "First Evening of Jewish Music" and the concert/lectures which subsequently followed in St. Petersburg, Rostow on the Don and other locations. A new period in Jewish music had thus begun and the foundation for the establishment of an entire school of Jewish musical composition had been laid. Due to the great success of these concert/lectures, Jewish and non-Jewish composers and Russian intellectuals were, for the first time, exposed to the sounds of Eastern European folk songs adapted artfully for the concert hall. In a letter to Engel, Vladamir Stassov expressed his pleasure with Engel's efforts:

I am continuously strongly gladdened by your project on Jewish folk songs - a fundamental work; I always felt that it had been long overdue to introduce the Jewish contribution into the history and repository of the new European music; about one-half and perhaps more of all Gregorian, Ambrosian and other Christian melodies are based on Jewish roots...and for this reason I am very happy that you plan to study and publish semitic folk songs which are available to you.<sup>14</sup>

Stassov was not the only intellectual impressed by Engel's initiative. As stated, the concert/lecture given in St. Petersburg in 1901 was heard by a group of young Jewish composers, many of whom were studying under Nicolas Rimsky-Korsakov at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Whereas the audience in Moscow treated the idea of Jewish art music as something interesting and new, the Jewish composers of St. Petersburg, due

<sup>14</sup>Letter dated 11 February, 1904. J.D. Engel, Glazami Sovremennika: Collected Articles, ed. by I. Kunina, (Moscow: 1971), 475. As appears in Joachim Braun, Jews and Jewish Elements in Soviet Music, (Tel-Aviv: Israel Music Publishing, 1978), 34.

largely to the influence of Rimsky-Korsakov, were ready to accept the idea of creating a Jewish school of composition similar to the Russian national school founded by the "Mighty Five" (Cesar Cui, Alexander Borodin, Mily Balakirev, Modest Moussorgsky, and Nicolas Rimsky-Korsakov). One of these gifted young musicians, Ephraim Skliar,<sup>15</sup> helped form Kinnor Zion in 1902, a club dedicated to creating and performing Jewish music. Rimsky-Korsakov was so impressed with the work of Skliar that, after hearing and analyzing one of his romances on a Jewish tune, uttered the now famous quote:

Well, write another thirty such things and you will found a new school... Why do you imitate European and Russian composers? The Jews possess tremendous folk treasures. I myself have heard your religious songs, and they have made a deep impression on me. Think about it. Yes, Jewish music awaits her Jewish Glinka.<sup>16</sup>

Powerful as Rimsky-Korsakov's words were, Skliar graduated the Conservatory in 1903 and plans for a large organization for Jewish music were postponed. In 1906, Lazar Saminsky<sup>17</sup> entered the Conservatory and joined forces with Skliar (who was still in St. Petersburg), Solomon Rosowsky, the pianist Leo (Arieh) Nisvitsky and the Jewish

<sup>15</sup>Born 1871 in Timkevitchi and son of a part-time cantor. Studied at Warsaw Conservatory, was protege of Balakirev before coming to St. Petersburg to study with Rimsky-Korsakov. One of the founding members of the Society For Jewish Folk Music, choral director of the St. Petersburg Synagogue, conductor of *Hazamir* choir in Lodz in 1907. Settled permanently in 1912 and was director of the Royal Conservatory. Assumed a victim of the Holocaust for nothing was heard of him after World War II. (Weisser, Modern Renaissance, 47.)

<sup>16</sup>Quote from conversation with Solomon Rosowsky as appears in Albert Weisser, Modern Renaissance, 44.

<sup>17</sup>Born 1882 in Vale-Gotzulovo, near Odessa. Entered St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1906 where he was pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov. Graduated in 1910, became assistant music editor of *Russkaya Molva* from 1912-13. From 1914 to 1919 he travelled, conducted and lectured widely, finally settling in the United States in 1920. In 1924 he became music director of Temple Emanuel in New York City. For more details, see Albert Weisser, Modern Renaissance.

pedagogue Joseph Tamars in order to further plans for a permanent organization. Application to the Czarist government to form a Jewish Music Society was made, and after initially being refused, the Society for Jewish Folk Music was founded on November 30, 1908.<sup>18</sup>

Although the Society lasted little more than a decade, it achieved great success and formed the basis of a Jewish national school of music. It had 389 active members throughout Russia, held some 150 concerts and lectures a year, published a large amount of music and was active in collecting folk music. Its membership roster included such famous composers as Moses Milner, Joseph Achron, Michael Gniessin, and Alexander Krein.<sup>19</sup>

Joachim Braun, in his paper Jews in Soviet Music,<sup>20</sup> discusses the importance of the Society for Jewish Music as an integral part of the formation of a national style of Jewish art music. In describing the unique set of social and musical conditions which existed in Russia at the turn of the century, Braun cites the non-Jewish Russian musicologist Leonid Sabaneyev's conclusions drawn from his research on the formation of a Jewish school of national music:

All preconditions for a further development of this spirit exist: musical talent, a number of Jewish musicians, the artistic temperament of a nation,

<sup>18</sup>For more detailed information on The Society for Jewish Folk Music, see Albert Weisser, Modern Renaissance, 41-65.

<sup>19</sup>See Albert Weisser, Modern Renaissance, chpts. 2-6 for more information on these composers.

<sup>20</sup>Initially a research paper for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, later expanded and published as Jews and Jewish Elements in Soviet Music, op. cited.

suitability to musical activity, an interest in national art, the example of past musicians - all this justifies the assumption that the Jewish people will enrich world music literature with a stream of fresh and original works...we can justifiably assume that the blossoming of the Jewish people's musical culture has announced itself.<sup>21</sup>

Engel was the motivator who brought about this "blossoming of Jewish musical culture." Although he lived in Moscow and was not one of the original founding members of the St. Petersburg chapter of the Society for Jewish Folk Music (he formed a Moscow branch in 1913), he must be considered the founder and driving force behind not only the Society but of the entire St. Petersburg School of composers. Rita Flomenboim, a musicologist at Bar-Ilan University in Tel-Aviv who has been researching Engel and the St. Petersburg school for many years, told me in private conversations that in her opinion, Engel was the founder of the Society for Jewish Folk Music. Ms. Flomenboim also contends that it was Engel who was the founder of a this new school of composition whose basis was the folk song traditions of eastern European communities.<sup>22</sup>

It was Engel more than any other who championed the idea of creating a national Jewish art music. He was able to inspire an entire society through his tireless activities as composer, through his many musicological expeditions into towns inside the Pale of Settlement in order to collect folk tunes and through his work as editor, music critic, and publisher. Menasheh Ravina writes that although Engel was not the actual founder of The

<sup>21</sup>Leonid Sabaneyev, *Die Nationale jüdische Schule in der Musik*, (Vienna: 1927), 24-25. As quoted in Joachim Braun, *Jews and Jewish Elements in Soviet Music*, 66.

<sup>22</sup>Interview by author, 19 July 1993, Natanya, Israel, tape recording.

Society for Jewish Folk Music, it was

...his continuous activity in the field of Jewish music [that] turned all eyes toward him. Both Christian and Jewish musicians saw in him the defender of Jewish [music] - and rightly so. Engel fought for his new idea with all the strength [he possessed], with words and music, with lectures and concerts.<sup>23</sup>

Engel's success as a pioneer and his place as founder of a national school of composition is not simply the result of sheer determination and hard work, but rather a combination of great talent and ability coupled with an irresistible personality. Albert Weisser, in discussing Engel's role as pioneer and his ability to motivate others, writes that "there was, without doubt, something quite matchless about the man that was able to inspire in others an immense devotion to the cause of contemporary Jewish music."<sup>24</sup> Jacob Weinberg, who was a personal friend of Engel's, glowingly furthers Weisser's description of Engel's "matchless" personality:

I can hardly name among even the biggest people I was fortunate to know a person of Engel's absolutely exceptional straight-forwardness, artistic honesty, integrity and charm, or better to say, personal magnetism. He was practically adored by everyone who ever knew him. It would take hours to illustrate Engel's kindness and simply disarming attractiveness...

Perhaps the strongest feature of Engel's personality was his deep awareness of the artist's great duty and severe responsibility to his people...Engel's fanatic devotion to Jewish music was an organic part of his love to his people.<sup>25</sup>

During the period immediately preceding and following the formation of the Society until his immigration to Berlin in 1922, Engel continued to research and arrange folk tunes, a task he had been actively doing since his opera Esther of 1894. Aside from his

<sup>23</sup>Menasheh Ravina, Joel Engel, 47.

<sup>24</sup>Albert Weisser, Modern Renaissance, 71.

<sup>25</sup>Jacob Weinberg, "Joel Engel," 37.

collaboration with Marek, which resulted in the publication by Engel of the First Album of Ten Jewish Folksongs in 1905, two additional volumes of folk songs came later, one each in 1916 and 1920. In 1918, his beautiful edition of Fifty Children's Songs (*Kinderlieder*) and Shirei Y'Ladim were first published; later editions appeared in 1923.

Although he was publishing music on his own, Engel did not have very much time to compose, for he was active in many other fields of endeavour. Aside from his journalistic career, he was founder and elected president of the National Conservatory in Moscow, and was all the while continuing to give explanatory lectures at concerts of Jewish music. In 1912, he travelled to Southern Russia with Shlomo An-Ski<sup>26</sup> to collect Jewish folklore including poems, songs and melodies. During this expedition, they heard the legend of The Dybbuk; ten years later it would become a popular play produced by *Habimah* theatre in Moscow with Engel providing the incidental music.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Author, playwright, folklorist and poet. Born Shlomo Zainwill Rappaport in 1863. Devoted much of his life to the social struggle of the Russian people. Ardent collector of Jewish folklore, adapted legend of *The Dybbuk* into a play which was later translated into Hebrew by Chayim N. Bialik. An-Ski died in Warsaw in 1920. (Weisser, Modern Renaissance: Encyclopaedia Judaica.)

<sup>27</sup> Engel arranged the music into an instrumental suite, published by *Yuval* in 1926; a piano reduction of same was also published in 1926. Archive of *Habimah* theater in Tel Aviv has full unpublished manuscript of entire score for *The Dybbuk*.

## THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION, BERLIN AND THE ROAD TO PALESTINE

The Russian Revolution of 1917 would prove to have irreversible effects on the life of Joel Engel and other Russian musicians and intellectuals. Although some composers, such as Michael Gnessin, were hopeful that the Revolution would provide the country with a new artistic attitude and future, others sensed the coming censorship and stifling of ethnic individuality which would result from the policies of the new regime. Many great artists would leave immediately or within a few years, choosing to pursue their artistic goals in the more culturally open-minded West.

The Society for Jewish Folk Music was forced to disband following the Revolution.<sup>28</sup> Of the founders, the pianist Leo Nisvitsky moved to Switzerland, Saminsky to America and Rosowsky left initially for Israel and eventually for America; others, such as Joseph Achron, also emigrated to America. Some prominent members, such as Michael Gnessin and Alexander Krein chose to stay in Russia, a decision which would eventually result in a loss of Jewish character in their works. Braun summarizes the overall situation thusly: "the fate of those former society members who remained in Russia illustrates the conditions which prevailed in the Soviet Union at that time which led to the evaporation of

<sup>28</sup>Weisser cites reports of sporadically continuing activities of The Society For Jewish Folk Music into the 1930's.

Jewish music."<sup>29</sup>

As for Engel, the Revolution resulted in the closing of *Russkiya Vyedemostii* and the loss of his prestigious position as critic. He was appointed principal of a children's school in Malachouka, near Moscow, where he remained until 1922. His Fifty Children's Songs were composed during this period and he was involved with the newly formed *Habimah* theater. Free of his responsibilities with the newspaper, Engel would now be able to devote himself to composition with greater energy than ever before. "I bless the Russian Revolution, because the Bolsheviks have shut down all the newspapers and thank God, I have no place to work as a critic [and can therefore concentrate on composition]".<sup>30</sup>

By 1922 Engel realized that it was becoming impossible to be Jewish in Russia and therefore even more impossible to pursue his ideal to compose and promote art music whose essential character was Jewish. Seeking a new center for Jewish music, he moved to Berlin and began organizing concerts and lectures in Germany and Austria. With the help of the Jewish publishers Yibneh, Ever and Judischer Verlag, Engel founded the *Yuval* publishing house which published his own works as well as reprints of The Society for Jewish Music publications.

For a short time it appeared that Berlin would be the new center for Jewish art music and culture. But interest waned and funds for promoting concerts and publishing

<sup>29</sup>Joachim Braun, "Jews in Soviet Music," Research Paper #22, (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1976.), 10, photocopied.

<sup>30</sup>From a conversation with Rosowsky as quoted in Albert Weisser, Modern Renaissance, 72.

music began to evaporate. Although the music which was heard at these concerts was pleasing to the Jews of Germany, they could not sense the importance of creating and developing Jewish national music. Perhaps due to the vast wealth and long history of great non-Jewish music at their disposal, Europeans at this time did not express a need for Jewish art music. Engel now fully understood that he must leave for Palestine, the only rightful, natural and spiritual home for him to pursue his goal of developing Jewish music into an art form.

and decided to accept the position. The heads of school Engel and Mr.

manager of the school, give insight into Engel's dreams for the future.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hershberg, *Music in Palestine, 1880-1948, A Social History* (London: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), ch. 5, p. 6.

## ACTIVITIES IN PALESTINE

Prior to Engel's arrival in Jaffa in 1924, members of the Society for Jewish Folk Music had begun to establish a connection with Palestine. Even before the Revolution and World War I, concert tours by David Schor, Leo Nisvitsky, Michael Gnessin and Lazar Saminsky contributed to a general shift of interest away from Eastern Europe and towards Palestine.<sup>31</sup> Nisvitsky stayed in Palestine following a concert in 1921, changing his name to Arie Abilea, and Jacob Weinberg immigrated in 1923, staying for four years before going to America. Gneissen stayed for a few months, but in the end decided to return to Russia. A committee was formed by Abilea in order to "pave the way for Engel's immigration to Palestine, in the hope that the arrival of the venerable scholar and musician would gradually turn Palestine into the essential center for the research and publication of Jewish music."<sup>32</sup>

In 1924, while still in Berlin, Engel began negotiations for employment at the Shulamit School in Tel Aviv. Although he did not particularly want to teach, he needed a secure income and decided to accept the position. The letters between Engel and Mr. Hopenko, manager of the school, give insight into Engel's dreams for the future.

<sup>31</sup>Jehoash Hirshberg, Music in Palestine, 1880-1948. A Social History, (London: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), ch. 5, p.6.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 8. August 31, 1924, *Ibid.*, 88.

On May 2, 1924, he wrote:

To tell you the truth, I have no desire to teach, or to write for papers, or publish my books and articles, or lecture, or organize concerts - in short, I have no desire to do what I have been doing up until now. What attracts me at present is the writing of music. But this requires time, a guaranteed income and unshattered nerves. If teaching will ensure that I have both a livelihood and enough time for composing, then I am willing to take up employment in it.<sup>33</sup>

News of Engel's imminent arrival was hailed as a major cultural event and stirred the musical circles of Tel Aviv. Grandiose plans to form a central conservatory headed by Engel were discussed; Engel would come to Tel Aviv and use all his organizational abilities to found a large musical institution which would unite all teachers under a new joint project. Correspondence with Hopenko show how Engel began to be swept up in these unrealistic dreams:

My dream is that you should all work together...all my life I have worked in the field of Jewish music. Now, finally, there is hope of establishing an institution which will not be estranged from Jewish music, or from the Jewish artistic ideal. I am in favor of this institution.<sup>34</sup>

I shall not conceal from you that my dream is to combine your enterprise with...Weinberg and with the Jerusalem group. Only by combining all these forces and channelling them in one direction can we create a homogeneous and viable conservatory.<sup>35</sup>

But in the end no such offer was forthcoming. Hopenko had enough trouble running even one music school; he understood well the real difficulties of creating a large scale institution.

Engel, however, would not be dissuaded. Driven by his relentless passion for

<sup>33</sup>As appears in Menasheh Ravina, *Joel Engel*, 86. Trans. by Carol Sutherland.

<sup>34</sup>Letter of August 2, 1924. *Ibid.*, 88. - author in which she recalls a conversation with

<sup>35</sup>Letter of August 31, 1924. *Ibid.*, 88. - any. 19 July 1993. Natanya, Israel. tape recording.

Jewish music, he arrived in Palestine in December of 1924. A few months later, he completed the transfer of his publishing house *Yuval* from Berlin to Tel Aviv. He began composing furiously, as if on a mission to single-handedly rebuild the songs of Israel just as the land was being rebuilt. Most of his compositions of this time were folk pieces aimed at laying an indigenous musical foundation; light songs, refrains, work songs, children's songs, and songs for pioneers.

In April of 1925 Engel began writing for the *Ohel* theater in Tel Aviv. During his tenure as music director, he wrote, among other compositions, incidental music to plays by I. L. Peretz. But it is not enough to simply say he wrote music for shows. He continued the idea of creating specifically Israeli folk songs which gave expression to the pioneer spirit of the land. Engel, who volunteered his time to the theater, would teach his new songs to the actors who formed the theater's chorus. Whenever the company toured from Tel Aviv to the *kibbutzim* around the country, they would perform their show on the first night, and on the second night Engel would teach the whole kibbutz the new songs.<sup>36</sup> Engel's idea was to create a *shir yisraeli chadash*, a new Israeli song, and spread it throughout the new land.

But Joel Engel's dream was fading. He tried to earn money writing essays and reviews for newspapers and periodicals, by conducting choruses and by giving private lessons in theory and harmony. His friends tried to acquire a position for him as

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<sup>36</sup>Rita Flomenboim, interview with the author in which she recalls a conversation with Yehuda Gabbai, an actor in the company. 19 July 1993, Natanya, Israel, tape recording.

superintendent of music education, but due to the pettiness of the Board of Education, he was denied the position, forcing him to burden himself with excessive teaching of young children. As a final insult, the Shulamit School continually failed to pay his salary. From his letters we understand that he was extremely unhappy in Palestine and that his spirit had been broken; he was humiliated by lack of respect, was not honored, and was exhausted from all the pressures of life in the new land.<sup>37</sup> After little more than two years in Palestine, Joel Engel died on February 13, 1927.

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<sup>37</sup>Letters of Rivka Levenson-Kaplan as related to me by Rita Flomenboim.

## SONGS OF JOEL ENGEL: AN ANALYSIS

Albert Weisser's book, The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music (1954), contains the only substantial English language attempt at analyzing the music of Joel Engel. After reading his chapter, one could easily be dissuaded from including Engel on concerts of Jewish music for he concludes that

Engel's arrangements too often exhibit a kind of sickly, spineless saloon style. Technically it is loaded with period mannerisms and such a preponderance of the use of the *arpeggio*, augmented and diminished triads that, were it not for some rhythmical alterations, these arrangements could all very easily sound alike...somehow the man's limited musical equipment never allowed him to reach their very core.<sup>38</sup>

Weisser never doubts Engel's influence as a motivator and pioneer of Jewish art music. He applauds Engel's work as a collector and distributor of Jewish folk song, and admits to being seduced by Engel's energy, enthusiasm and determination. He concludes, however, by stating that "musical inventiveness and loftiness of personality do not always go hand in hand, and in Engel the two planes are not on an equal par".<sup>39</sup>

The purpose of this analysis is to show that in spite of Weisser's highly scholarly work - much of which is accurate - there remain many wonderful songs which are valuable for the concert hall; songs whose subject matter, melodic contour, harmonic interest and

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<sup>38</sup>Albert Weisser, Modern Renaissance, 79.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

depth of emotion will educate, captivate and please concert audiences. The influence of Engel the man, the pioneer and innovator will not live on unless we continue to honor his contributions as composer. The following is a brief analysis of a sampling of the many songs which could be considered for any Jewish (or even secular!) song recital.

*Osso Boiker* (Opus 24, No. 1.)

*Osso Boiker* is a folk song which Engel dedicated to Alexander Krein. The subtitle of this song, *magidisher moschol*, informs us that the text is a parable as told by a *magid*, a preacher who travelled from town to town. In this story, the *magid* depicts a man, Yankel (a popular name in Jewish literature), who starts out on a journey in the darkness of night after shabbat has ended. He falls asleep for days and after finally awakening asks God, "How long will you let me sleep?" God answers with words from Isaiah 21:12: "*Osso boiker v'gam lailah*; morning comes and also the night - and you, Yankel, you have overslept."

The composition is written in B-minor and is marked *lento, misterioso*. The opening is dark, setting the mood of the piece, all written in left hand, based on the dominant (F#). Although the key signature is B-minor, Engel gives an atmosphere of confusion by purposely avoiding establishment of the tonic. The use of augmented and

diminished chords accurately expresses the darkness, uncertainty and dream-like quality of the text, refuting Weisser's contention that these are merely "period mannerisms".

Canto. *Lento, misterioso.*

Piano. *pp*

Scha .  
Oyó .

The use of broken *arpeggios* continues the dreamy aura of the composition, punctuated and bound together by a descending b-harmonic minor motif which recurs whenever the text refers to Yankel.

*pensieroso*

„Wa - ji - ten I - cho, wa - ji - ten I - cho! Un Jan.kl fort in weg.  
„И Борз дастъ те. Ой, и Борз дастъ те - Ой, и Я.новъ Я.дотъ въ путь.

of these "period mannerisms" is not indiscriminate; by his use of augmented and diminished chords he achieves a dreamy, almost other-worldly texture which accurately portrays the action of the poetry.

A grand *maestoso* chordal sequence introduces God's famous words, climaxing in the relative major (D).

The musical score consists of two systems. The top system features a vocal line with lyrics: "ent. fort: ..De .. 200" and "st. 1222: ..Bema .. 10". The bottom system features a piano accompaniment with lyrics: "bel. ker, 10. gam lei. lah. u" and "ym. po u ger-200 novo.".

The piece ends with a combination of Yankel's simple descending motif in the left hand and the *maestoso* grandeur of God above in the right hand, leading to a final cadence in B-major.

As Weisser states, there is an abundant use augmented and diminished chords and some use of *arpeggio*, but the effect is certainly not "sickly" or "saloon style." Engel's usage of these "period mannerisms" is not indiscriminate; by his use of augmented and diminished chords he achieves a dreamy, almost other-worldly texture which accurately illustrates the action of the poetry.

### *Mare (Ma'aseh)*

Published in Moscow as part of the *Volkslieder* collection of 1911, Engel takes a well-known folk song from the shtetl and arranges it for piano. The poem was originally published in 1901 by Ginsburg and Marek; the melody was probably notated during one of the expeditions. The music and text appeared together for the first time in this volume.

The song sets an unhappy tale of a beautiful and harmonious world which becomes imperfect after the death of a Jewish king. This song serves as another fine example of how Engel took a folk melody and arranged it for the concert halls of Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. Engel employs a popular late-Romantic style of using lushly expressive *arpeggio* and *appoggiatura* devices to create a sense of longing, setting a simple b-minor folk melody in a rich harmonic texture.

**Poco Adagio.**

Canto.

Piano.

1. A  
1. To  
Fino.

Hebrew poet, born in Mikhailovka, Russia in 1891, studied in Moscow in 1891 and became a fervent supporter of Zionism through his contact with Hovevi Zion. Throughout a lifetime of travels, he remained devoted to the Hebrew language and for the nationalism, finally settling in Palestine in 1937. His influence on Hebrew language and literature is enormous.

Menachem Ravitz, *Isidore Engel*, 83.

*Omrin Yeshnah Eretz* (Op.39, No. 1)

Opus 39, published in 1923 by *Yuval* under the title *Drei Melodien* (Three Melodies), is comprised of three songs set to poems by Saul Tchernichovsky<sup>40</sup> which Engel composed while living in Berlin. Engel set *Omrin Yeshna Eretz* and *Shoshanat Playim* in the original Hebrew; *Geven a Mol a Meilech* was written in Hebrew but set in Yiddish, most likely due to the difficulty of Tchernichovsky's Hebrew prose. Unlike Engel's earlier folk song settings, the melodies of opus 39 are original. *Omrin Yeshna Eretz* expresses Tchernichovsky's zeal for a national goal for the Jewish people, speaking of a land bathed in radiant sunshine, built on seven pillars, a place where one may find all that one desires. Rabbi Akiva welcomes each one to such a place, affirming that "every Jew is holy; You are the Maccabi!"

Of the Three Melodies, *Omrin Yeshna Eretz* achieved particular success due to the folk quality of its melody. Ravina writes that "an air of legend hovers over the song, which is permeated with longing for a sun-drenched land."<sup>41</sup>

Written in E-flat major with a meter of 12/8, the melody is flowing, smooth and pastoral; the accompaniment supports the melody line with solid block chords of dotted

<sup>40</sup>Hebrew poet, born in Mikhailovka, Russia in 1875. Moved to Odessa in 1890 and became a fervent supporter of Zionism through his contact with *Hovevi Zion*. Throughout a lifetime of travels, he remained devoted to the Hebrew language and Jewish nationalism, finally settling in Palestine in 1931. His influence on Hebrew language and literature is enormous.

<sup>41</sup>Menasheh Ravina, *Joel Engel*, 85.

was living in Berlin when he wrote this song. He did not speak Hebrew and therefore he set

quarter-notes, yielding a sense of 4/4 meter.

Canto. *Andante sostenuto.*

Piano. *Andante sostenuto.*

Om - rim: jesch-nah e - rez, —  
Gib's ein Land auf Er - den, —

The song is essentially in two strophic verses; the first verse firmly in E-flat major, the second verse transposed up to G-flat major with a transitional bridge separating the two. In each verse, the harmony stays generally around the tonic (E-flat and G-flat respectively) with some non-harmonic coloristic notes added for variety. The song ends resoundingly in E-flat major.

The piece is easy for listeners to absorb due to the repetition of rhythmic elements in the melody. It is only the last two measures of the song, on the words "You are the Maccabi" that Engel breaks the rhythmic flow in order to emphasize the climax of the song more strongly. The overall effect is satisfying through its cohesiveness, and *Omrim* *Yeshna Eretz* remains one of Engel's most popular songs.

Due to the popularity of this song, I feel a brief discussion of word accentuation is necessary. I have heard this song on numerous recitals over the years, and there is still no agreement on how to settle the problem of penultimate verses final syllable stress. Engel was living in Berlin when he wrote this song, he did not speak Hebrew and therefore he set

the melody to suit the word accent pattern of Tchernichovsky's original poem. Ravina helps clarify this point:

The meter determined by the poet Tchernichovsky had penultimate stress, and in accordance with this, Engel arranged his melody in such a way that the first note in each motif appears at the start of the measure. How great was his disappointment when the singer Rodinov performed the song later in *Eretz Yisrael* and broached the question of final stress...pronouncing the words with the stress on the final syllable meant changing the rhythm of the tune. And a change of rhythm wrought havoc with the entire song [because] each measure would now require to be prefaced with an upbeat (anacrusis). The steady rhythm would be replaced by a halting rhythm... The melody lost its character and the composer was deeply distressed.<sup>42</sup>

It is my feeling that a performer must always honor the intentions of a composer.

Engel wanted the song to be performed the way it was written. With this in mind, I argue that it is our duty to respect his original composition particularly when he is no longer living to defend our well intended changes. As interpreters of music, we have the right to express music any way we see fit; we do not, however, retain the license to rewrite another's composition.

#### *Shoshanat Playim* (Opus 39, No.2)

The second of the *Drei Melodien*, *Shoshanat Playim* is also known as *Die Wunderrose*. The text explores typical Romantic Era feelings of longing for something potentially uncertain and unattainable. Tchernichovsky uses the rose as an image of love or of anything else one wants to attain; recognizing it and knowing when to pluck the rose is

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

the goal we seek. "Are you my rose?" is a metaphoric question raised repeatedly in the poem, and "happy is the one who knows" is the desired answer. Alternately, unhappy is the one who goes through life never knowing when the symbolic blooming rose is before him and never seizing the moment to pluck that rose.

*Shoshanat Playim* is a finely crafted song and arguably the most harmonically interesting of the three. Marked *lento, pensieroso* (slow and thoughtful) and in 6/8 meter, the key signature is F, but the tonic, as in *Osso Boiker*, is never quite established, all the while obscured by chromatic coloring. There are very few triads at all. Most chords are richly extended with the use of sevenths, ninths and elevenths, giving an overall Late-Romantic feeling of questioning and uncertainty which beautifully paints the poetry.

*Lento, pensieroso.*

Canto. *p*

*Lento, pensieroso.*

Piano. *p*

Schoschanath pla-im b'-ru-chath El —  
Die Wun-der - ro-se Got-tes - gnad; —

Although the key signature is one flat, the melody is not clearly in F-major or d-minor and there is always a feeling of movement to another tonal area; the melody lacks a stability of key, touching on d-minor, e-minor, E-major and b-flat minor. A sort of tonal plane is created which is delineated by the repetition of certain melodic and rhythmic

motifs. The opening bars contain a leap of a perfect fifth followed by a major or minor third, creating an intervallic sequence used throughout. As in *Omrin Yeshna Eretz*, repetition of rhythmic elements, in this case the pattern of eighths, sixteenths and duplet eighth notes, are used throughout to give the piece its form, independent of the chromatic harmony changes. These motivic features, together with an A - *development* - A format, give the piece an easily discernible structure which provides the listener with a familiar point of reference within an unstable tonality.

### *Children's Songs*

Joel Engel was a prolific composer of songs for children, most of which were written during his tenure as principal in Melachouka. His Fifty Children's Songs (*Kinderlieder*) were published twice in Moscow (1916 and 1918) and twice again in Berlin by Juval in 1923. One of the Berlin editions was published for use in schools and contains Hebrew text with unaccompanied solo vocal lines. A second edition has piano accompaniment with Hebrew and German text. Many of these delightful songs are melodies which Engel wrote himself in the folk style; five of the fifty are based on melodies transcribed while he was on expedition. According to the introduction to the *Juval* school edition, the Hebrew poetry is provided by S. Ben-Zion;<sup>43</sup> some of the poems are direct translations of the original Yiddish, others were written anew by Ben-Zion based on the

<sup>43</sup>Pseudonym of Simcha Alter Gutmann (1870 -1932), Hebrew and Yiddish author. (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*)

subject matter of the original source. A marking in the index tells which poems are direct translations.

*Modeh Ani* is the first of the *Kinderlieder*. In the accompanied Berlin edition, Engel beautifully sets this personal prayer of thanksgiving which is said upon awakening in the morning. Composed in 3/4 time with a key signature of d-minor, the melody is short and simple, outlining the natural minor scale and ending with a sub-dominant to tonic cadence characteristic of weekday nusach. The meter shifts imperceptibly between 3/4 and 2/4, giving the melody a feeling of unmeasured chant. In just 18 measures (perhaps representing *chai*?) Engel manages to capture the essence of this prayer which expresses the thankfulness one feels for God's mercy and faithfulness.

The accompaniment maintains a steady eighth-note pulsing which, when played within the indicated *largo*, acts as a heartbeat underneath the *legato* melody line above. Engel employs a rich chordal style and delays the tonic through the use of *appoggiatura* that leans heavily into the resolving tone, creating a nearly paradigmatic Romantic era sense of yearning and longing. The utilization of *appoggiatura* is a characteristic which Engel doubtlessly internalized from the music of Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and others.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Modeh Ani". It consists of two staves: a vocal line labeled "Canto" and a piano accompaniment labeled "Piano". The tempo and mood are indicated as "Largo con liberta, religioso." The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line is a simple melody in D minor, ending with a sub-dominant to tonic cadence. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pulsing. The score includes the lyrics "Mo - deh, Dank, dank!" and a "pudito" marking.

Some of Engel's most artfully crafted songs exist in the series *Shirei Y'Ladim*, published by Yuval in 1923. The nine songs of this group were written for one or two voices with piano accompaniment. The texts are poems for children dealing with cheerful subjects such as spring and friendship; the poems abound with references to birds and other animals. Engel's settings are perfectly suited to the text for they are playful, rhythmically lively and harmonically uncluttered.

Take for example Tchernichovsky's poem, *El Haankor* (No. 8). The subject is the tiny ankor, a type of bird, and a child who feeds it crumbs and saves it from a cat. Engel illustrates the playfulness of the active little bird by using thirty-second note and sixteenth note figures written entirely in the treble clef. The melody is squarely in e-minor, and the accompaniment alternates between e-minor and the parallel E-major. The *leggiero* marking over the second measure reveals the nature of this song and of the whole *Shirei Y'Ladim* series.

J. Engel

Soprano  
Canto.

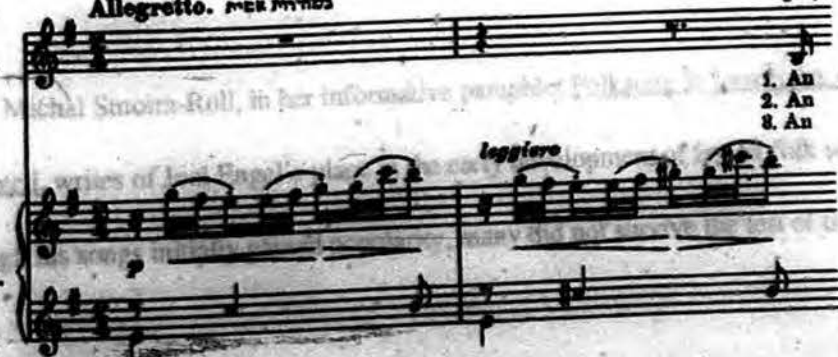
Allegretto. M. 8. 1923

p 17

1. An  
2. An  
3. An

Piano.

leggiero



All nine of the *Shirei Y'Ladim* songs are thoroughly charming and altogether delightful. In this collection of songs, Engel displays a penchant for children's music and one gains a sense of his deep commitment to composing quality pieces for young children. Albert Weisser amply summarizes Engel's simplicity and effectiveness in writing songs for children, saying that "by fleecing his harmonic scheme of unessentials Engel here wrote in his best and most characteristic vein. His medium was undoubtedly best in writing children's music for children."<sup>44</sup>

#### *Sh'nei Michtavim*

After Engel reached Palestine in 1924, he began composing with more energy than at any other period in his life. His prolific output of songs, as stated earlier, was due in large part to his feeling that the music of Israel must be rebuilt just as the pioneers were rebuilding the land. It was his intention to establish a new type of Israeli song which would reflect the spirit of the land and its people. Thus he composed many labor songs, light refrains and children's songs, all directed at the pioneers who were rebuilding their native land.

Michal Smoira-Roll, in her informative pamphlet *Folksong In Israel: An Analysis Attempted*, writes of Joel Engel's place in the early development of Israeli folk song. Although his songs initially gained popularity, many did not survive the test of time and he

<sup>44</sup>Michal Smoira-Roll, *Folksong in Israel: An Analysis Attempted* (Tel-Aviv: Israeli Music Institute, 1963), 34.

<sup>45</sup>Engel was born in Russia, 1890. Hebrew poet, novelist and translator.

<sup>44</sup>Albert Weisser, *Modern Renaissance*, 75. (c)

was not entirely successful at creating a new and lasting Israeli song style. Using two particularly well-liked songs of the period, *B'nei Chaltz* (Build, Pioneer) and *Agvania* (Tomato) as examples, Smoira-Roll concludes that Engel's songs were not altogether new; they were, rather, a conglomerate of motifs borrowed from many sources. She writes:

With the arrival of Joel Engel in 1924, a new movement arose which set itself the aim of creating a new Israeli song. A great deal of work was invested in the effort although the results were of dubious value. Engel's songs which swept the country in dozens were a wonderful combination of the East-European Jewish tradition, of completely alien influences belonging with the music of the fine arts, and of some sort of a new element which strikes one as unnatural and contrived, as though introduced deliberately.<sup>45</sup>

*Shnei Michtavim* is one song from Joel Engel's years in Palestine which did survive and therefore deserves special mention. The popularity of the song is due to its highly singable melody, its fine craftsmanship and to the universality of feelings expressed in the Avigdor Hameiri<sup>46</sup> poem. The text relates a tearful correspondence between a mother in the Diaspora and her son in Jerusalem. In just two stanzas, Hameiri confronts the feelings of an immigrant who is determined to stay in Israel despite the pain of being separated from his family and homeland; feelings which immigrants of any time and place must ultimately endure.

<sup>45</sup>Michal Smoira-Roll, *Folksong in Israel: An Analysis Attempted*, (Tel-Aviv: Israel Music Institute, 1963), 14.

<sup>46</sup>Born Avigdor Feuerstein in Russia, 1890. Hebrew poet, novelist and translator. Died 1970 in Israel. (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*)

The melody and piano accompaniment gracefully suit both the sadness and determination inherent in the text. Written in c-minor, Engel establishes a lachrymose feeling by opening with a sparse and delicate motif characterized by eighth-note couplets adorned with grace notes.



The melody for each of the two verses of this strophic song begins by simply outlining a c-minor tetrachord punctuated in the accompaniment by eighth-note figures. After the simple, recitative-like opening, each verse builds climactically to high E-flat before settling back to the tonic. The climax of the first verse represents the mother's fervent request that her son return home; in the second stanza, the pioneer's determination to stay in Jerusalem is represented with the same climactic motive reinforced by the raised third (E-natural). In both cases, the climactic motif is tempered by the tearful eighth-note

His profound respect for the feelings expressed in the words and his impeccable craftsmanship have combined to give us some true masterpieces of Jewish art music.

couplets heard in the opening bars.



It is true that Engel has not forged any new ground or set any compositional trends with *Shnei Michtavim*. What he has done convincingly here and in the other songs I have illustrated is to artfully and sensitively set the text, always remaining faithful to the essential character of the poetry. I can agree with Weisser's contention that Engel's music is filled with "period mannerisms" such as *arpeggio*, *appoggiatura* and the occasional overuse of augmented and diminished chords. Through this brief analysis, however, I have attempted to show how Engel exhibited a great deal of artistic refinement in using these stylistic features. His profound respect for the feelings expressed in the words and his impeccable musicianship have combined to give us some true masterpieces of Jewish art music.

## CONCLUSION

It has been my aim to provide the reader with an overview of the life and music of Joel Engel. We have seen how he has earned a significant place in the history of Russian music as a musicologist, music critic and scholar. As a composer dedicated to the use of Jewish folk music as a basis for artistic compositions, Engel achieved his goal of building a new nationalistic movement of composition which elevated Jewish music from the *shtetles* to the concert halls of the world. As a tireless motivator and champion of Jewish music, Engel was a leader among his contemporaries of the St. Petersburg School. Engel looms large as the pioneering spirit who formed the ideological basis for the creation of Jewish art music.

As a musician, Engel was more than a pioneering motivator. He was an expressive composer and arranger who gave fresh life to the folk melodies he collected. His music deserves to be heard on concerts of Jewish and secular music alike; they are beautifully pleasing to the ear as well as educationally enlightening for the listener. Engel's finely written songs for children, furthermore, may still occupy a place in the repertoire of any synagogue's junior choir. It is my sincere hope that this paper has inspired the reader to further explore Joel Engel, the man and his music.

Abstracts From the International Symposium on Jewish Music  
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