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by Benjy Fox-Rosen

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On Not Understanding: Performing Yiddish Song Today
by Benjy Fox-Rosen

As a composer and performer of Yiddish music, I constantly confront the fact that most members of my audience do not understand the language of the texts I perform. What then do they understand? In this essay I investigate this question by first categorizing different levels of textual comprehension of contemporary Yiddish music performance before reflecting on the ways that my own compositional choices for the song-cycle *Two Worlds: The Poetry of Mordechai Gebirtig* inform this delicate yet volatile hierarchy. In thinking about my music and performance, I want to explore what Jeffrey Shandler terms the “secondary, or meta-level of signification” of Yiddish as it appears in a musical context. Shandler differentiates between using Yiddish for communicating information as the primary function and using the language for its symbolic value, which he asserts is of increasing import.¹ In the context of most Yiddish music performances, this question of *how* or *whether* to communicate the primary signification of texts is ever-present. Music does not communicate information in the same way as language, but can certainly lead listeners towards specific associations and meanings. There are multiple instances in which translation, imagined or guided, takes place during a musical performance and as a composer and performer I am a crucial mediator of these processes.

To begin probing this fraught process, I would like to borrow, with modifications, a rubric from the composer Aaron Copland who wrote of three planes of music listening in his book *What to Listen for in Music* (1939). Copland does not mention text or textual comprehension in his discussion of musical comprehension. I think his framework is useful though because texts or words, when set to music, are imbued with additional meaning and become inextricably linked to the finished composition. Thus a language comprehension rubric such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, seems less relevant to me since it would imply that the composer should be judged as an almost mechanical translator of a text. The composer does not match each note to a word, but rather interprets a text with their own expressive choices. Copland’s planes are helpful in keeping the expressive qualities of the music, rather than the mechanics of the music or the particular linguistic choices of the text, at the center of the discussion.

Planes of Listening

Copland’s three planes are the “(1) sensuous plane, (2) the expressive plane, [and] (3) the sheerly [sic] musical plane.”² For Copland, the sensuous plane is “[t]he simplest way of listening to music,” where the listener is interested in “the sheer pleasure of the musical sound itself.”³ One may turn on the radio to have some background noise or attend a symphonic concert to bathe in the sound of the orchestra. It is of course

¹ Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 4.

² Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (New York: Penguin Press, 1988), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

possible to do this without understanding what is happening on a musical level. The audience wants to lose itself in the sound. This level of listening is fully satisfying for many or, perhaps, even for most listeners.

Next Copland describes the expressive plane of listening:

My own feeling is that all music has an expressive power, some more and some less, but that all music has a certain meaning behind the notes and that the meaning behind the notes constitutes, after all, what the piece is saying, what the piece is about. This whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, “Is there a meaning to music?” My answer to that would be, “Yes.” And “Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?” My answer to that would be, “No.” Therein lies the difficulty.⁴

Copland goes on to describe how music may express a general mood. For example, a piece may be triumphant sounding, mournful, celebratory, and so forth. Additionally, each piece may have a unique expressive quality. As an example, Copland suggests the “48 fugue themes of Bach’s *Well Tempered Clavier*. Listen to each theme, one after another. You will soon realize that each theme mirrors a different world of feeling.”⁵ As the listener develops a deeper understanding of the theme and even a vocabulary to discuss it satisfactorily, s/he will feel the specific expressive qualities of that theme or of an entire piece of music. The listener may be able to describe in great detail what the music may mean, but this understanding is by no means universal, and will certainly not be agreed upon.

Third is the sheer musical plane. This plane consists of the “notes themselves and their manipulation.”⁶ Listeners are able to follow the melodies, rhythms, harmonies, and textures. They may even be able to follow the form of the music, identifying theme and variation, thematic development, and so forth. This is often the way that musicians and composers listen. They are interested in the technical musical details, sometimes even at the expense of experiencing the expressive qualities of a piece.

These three planes of listening are rarely separate. We typically listen on all three planes simultaneously: we enjoy the sensation of being immersed in music and may also follow the form and the expressive contour of a performance. But separating the listening or understanding of music into these three planes can help parse what a non-Yiddish speaking audience may or may not comprehend or believe they comprehend during a performance.

There are, however, certain limitations to Copland’s categories, primarily because in his rubric musical information is only communicated aurally. Music does not exist separately from social processes, historical contexts, and the individuals listening to and creating the music. A listener does not merely listen to music but engages in a web of behavior in which listening to music is a central component. Yiddish music, like any musical genre, has a specific set of norms, both musical and social. Musicologist Franco

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

Fabbri describes genre as “[having] different meanings for different people or at least...even if it can *denote* the same thing for different people, it *connotes* diverse things.”⁷ An understanding of a Yiddish text and its musical performance will be formed based on interpreting the specific signs and symbols, whether musical or otherwise, associated with Yiddish music.

Let us now return to Copland’s categories, with these caveats in mind, while thinking about Yiddish music. First, the sensuous plane: Copland states that on this plane one listens for the pleasure of listening, implying that s/he cannot understand complex musical structures. For the context of Yiddish song, I would like to modify this category: the listener on the sensuous plane does not understand Yiddish, but can grasp meaning from the sensuous elements surrounding the Yiddish performance, including the sounds of the language itself. What are the extra-musical reasons for attending a concert of Yiddish song and how do these reasons inform a listener’s understanding? Participation in Yiddish performance is often what Jeffrey Shandler describes as an “exercise in cultural salvage.”⁸ The simple act of sitting in an audience of a Yiddish performance may symbolize the righting of wrongs or the preservation of a language that is at a perceived risk. Or it may not. While reasons for attending may include such encompassing symbolic gestures, which can certainly color one’s understanding of a performance, motivation to attend a concert may also be based on trivial factors: the poster has an attractive image on it, the tickets are cheap, or the performance is at a neighborhood venue.

The motivation behind attending a concert then influences the respective individual’s understanding of the music’s “meaning.” For example, the globally popular klezmer clarinetist Giora Feidman describes klezmer music as “the holy glue to bring society to what we were born to be—one human family.”⁹ Feidman ascribes to klezmer music the power to unite society and reconcile cultural differences, thus imbuing the music with a very specific, indeed “holy” meaning. Attendance of a klezmer concert in this sense takes on an almost religious meaning, at the very least a humanitarian one. By marketing concerts in these terms, the cultural significance of the concert is greatly augmented. The listener, even before hearing a note, is ready to experience the music through this interpretive frame.

Similarly, attending a concert program titled “Maramaros: the Lost Jewish Music of Transylvania” affixes a level of meaning beyond the music itself, implying that by listening to this music the audience is rediscovering a music and culture that was lost.¹⁰ The use of such language is certainly economically motivated: inflated meaning translates to increased financial value, whether or not the enhanced significance is a falsification or personal interpretation of the performer, promoter, or presenter.

Another source of information for individuals who experience Yiddish performance on the sensuous plane are the semiotics of genre and the meaning implied

⁷ Franco Fabbri, “What kind of music?” *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 132.

⁸ Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 131.

⁹ Cited in Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 212.

¹⁰ Musikas, *Maramoros: The Lost Jewish Music of Transylvania*, Hannibal Records, B000000625, 1993, Compact Disc.

by employing a specific musical form in addition to or in fusion with klezmer or Yiddish music. An audience member may not understand the words of a Yiddish song but will recognize that a tango is being performed, bringing to mind the associations of that genre. The audience's perception of the "meaning" of a piece varies dramatically if I employ compositional elements of contemporary art music as opposed to elements drawn from klezmer or other folk-music genres. Genre associations ingrained by way of an individual's cultural education form a significant portion of meaning on the sensuous plane.

How does the expressive plane differ? In the expressive plane, the audience is able to understand the feeling or the mood of a text, that a text is celebratory, comic, or mournful. They hear a sea of syllables from which they can perhaps distinguish several individual words. Depending on the audience these words may be of the "kitchen Yiddish" variety: foods, a few expressions, the punch-line of a joke or two, words for family members, or—in the case of a German-speaking audience—scattered parts of speech. With the aid of performative and musical elements, the audience's limited comprehension of the linguistic content can be bolstered, resulting in some rudimentary understanding of the text.

Perhaps many readers of *In geveb* have learned Yiddish as adults and recall the shifting ability to engage with Yiddish texts over time and how one could grasp onto linguistic fragments in order to try and make some general sense of a passage. In the following text I have replaced most words with meaningless syllables while keeping words that an audience with some Yiddish background would likely recognize.

Mame, farvus ay yay tate yay yayt,
In ikh ay yay yay zikh ba-ay yay yay,
Zugsti er vil ikh ay ay yay yay mensh,
A kind vus nisht ay, miz men ay yayn?

A fairly sophisticated audience is likely to experience this text as such. In the expressive plane the audience has enough knowledge of the language or of the idiom to understand a little and misunderstand a lot. Consider also, how in this plane, a great part of the audience's experience of a text is mediated by the composer and the performer. Their choices shape both the secondary and primary meanings of the text because the audience understands enough to be misled in a specific direction but not enough to be able to recognize irony or tension between the text and the music. This is of course true in any performance context, but because Yiddish is most often performed *for* non-Yiddish speakers and *by* non-Yiddish speakers, the composer and performer have extra power in shaping meaning. The musical and performative choices that they make can result in utterly conflicting meanings, sometimes intentionally but also unwittingly.

The third plane, which Copland terms the purely musical plane, can be understood for our purposes as linguistic and cultural fluency. This audience is able to understand the Yiddish text literarily. Copland implies that some musicians listening on this technical level are missing the expressive qualities of music. Similarly, I would say that sometimes people who understand Yiddish on this level miss the expressive choices of the composer. I have received the critique from a Yiddish teacher that "Gebirtig

wouldn't have liked" the way that I set some of his texts to music. This critique assumes that there is a right and wrong way to musically interpret poetic texts, and perhaps also betrays some of the nostalgic sanctity that many ascribe to Yiddish texts and particularly to Gebirtig.

Who understands Yiddish on this level in a musical context? Included in this audience are Yiddishists, Hasidim and former Hasidim, high level Yiddish learners, and heritage speakers. Proportionally this is a tiny group and does not reflect the audience in most performance contexts. I will not discuss this plane much further, but would like to mention that performing for those who have cultural and linguistic fluency can produce a particular anxiety: it is rare when performing in Yiddish to have one's interpretations challenged, and most critiques are not as mild as "Gebirtig would have done it differently." I also note here that I am not including Hasidic Yiddish performance in my discussion. The context and aesthetics of such performances require a separate investigation.

Reflections on my own Compositions

The tensions between performance, interpretation, and translation deeply inform my own work as a composer and performer. I know I am not alone in these challenges, and my own perspective is enriched by a dialogue with other composers and performers. But I report here only reflections on my own work and while welcoming a more comprehensive study that could examine our collective endeavor.

The following pieces I discuss are from the song-cycle *Two Worlds: The Poetry of Mordechai Gebirtig*. In composing these settings, I found that each text required a somewhat different approach based on my interpretations of the texts and their place within the larger structure of the song-cycle. At times I employ the music to guide the listener to a specific feeling I experienced when reading the text. Other times the opposite is true and I aim to create a dissonance between the literal meaning and the musical associations. In the performance context I may give a brief translation or summary of an individual song before performing it. At the same time, I like to perform the song-cycle uninterrupted, the pieces flowing into one another without pause. For some performances I have had translations distributed in small program booklets. I have not used supertitles during concerts, largely due to the logistical complications of having someone familiar enough with the music and language to run the supertitles. In each mode of presentation there is a push and pull between offering an interpretive frame external to the music and allowing the music to do its own work, even if that work (dissonance or implied irony) remains seemingly incomprehensible.

The first piece is called *Ven der tate mikh shlogt*. [SOUNDCLOUD EMBED
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ווען דער טאטע מיך שלאגט

מאמע, פֿאַר וואָס, ווען דער טאַטע מיך שלאָגט,
און איך קום צו דיר זיך באַקלאַגן,
זאָגסטו, ער וויל, איך זאָל ווערן אַ מענטש,
אַ קינד וואָס נישט פֿאַלגט, מוז מען שלאָגן.

צי וויל אויך דער רבי, כיזאָל ווערן אַ מענטש?
ער שלאָגט מיך גאָר אָפֿט ביים פֿאַרהערן,
נאָר דו, מאמע, ביסט אַזאַ שלעכטע צו מיר,
דו ווילסט נישט אַ מענטש זאָל איך ווערן.

When Father Beats Me

Mama why, when father beats me,
And I come to you crying,
You say - He wants me to grow up to be a mensch,
A child who doesn't obey, must be beaten.

Does the Rabbi also want me to become a mensch?
He beats me so often while drilling me;^[1]
But you, Mama, are so cruel,
You don't want me to become a mensch.¹¹

Some listeners may understand that my setting of this text refers to the type of chant used for study in a *cheder*, though this assumes a degree of cultural fluency that even most Jewish audiences do not have. To a listener who does not understand this reference, where might they begin listening and what might they hold onto? In this text, the word “mama” is the first word, immediately understood regardless of the level of linguistic or cultural competence: a mother is being addressed. Additionally, the short simple phrases that often repeat with little or no musical variation may be heard as a call and response. This may not be clear the first time through the text but rather when it is repeated, when the accordion and then the clarinet answer each phrase after it is sung. Identifying this form aurally may bring up associations; call and response is used throughout the world in various musical, educational, and religious settings. The listener would not, however, understand that this text is of a child describing abuse and his insecurity regarding his relationship to his mother. Yet I do think that an audience listening on the expressive plane would still be able to grasp that this is a text addressed to a mother and that the speaker/singer is speaking in short childlike phrases.

In my setting of this text I chose to accentuate the natural rhythms and melodic shape of the spoken language. It remains within an idiom of Ashkenazi vocal music, it does not extend the rhythmic values of vowels so that they are exaggerated beyond what is common in spoken language, it is not particularly chromatic or adventurous melodically. In this song, I gave the text primacy and tried not to color it too much. I felt that the irony of the text would be strongest if I kept the setting simple, both in form and

¹¹ Benjy Fox-Rosen, *Two Worlds: The Poetry of Mordechai Gebirtig*, Golden Horn Records GHP 039-2, 2014, CD Liner Notes. Translation of this song and all subsequent songs are by Benjy Fox-Rosen with Julie Dawson and Joshua Waletzky.

instrumentation. I first set the text to music during a theater workshop led by Milena Kartowski in New York in 2009. Kartowski asked each participant to choose a Yiddish text to work with and then led each participant through an exercise that used repetition to link the text to rhythm and melody and eventually to physical movements as well. I was guided to repeat the text 20-30 times after which the melody and rhythms of the composition had become firm. I am describing this as a somewhat passive process, which it initially was. But after setting the text I made more active choices on *how* to repeat the text and how and if to repeat the melody. When the text is sung for the second time, initially the accordion and then also the clarinet answer the voice. On the first instrumental repetition of the melody, the instruments all play in unison. On the final instrumental repeat of the melody, each instrument plays the melody at its own pace, a technique not uncommon in contemporary and improvised music contexts, a choice made for aesthetic purposes as well as to accent a feeling of discomfort and disjuncture. After the performance a listener may not understand the individual words of the text but I hope may have an impression of a child speaking to his mother, with an underlying disquieting reference to school, learning, or some sort of a formalized educational setting, referenced through the call and response.

What I particularly love about this text is the turn that it takes in the last line, when the child questions his mother's love because she does not beat him. The shocking effect of the last line is simply not possible without a projected translation in real time. I perform a few other songs that have something of a punchline at the end. I often give a translation prior to performance, a solution that I find quite dissatisfying. Perhaps this speaks to my limits as a performer or to the difficulties inherent when a performer is simultaneously translating and performing. The musical setting can only take the uncomprehending audience so far and may still be unable to communicate all of the rhetorical codes of the text.

Now I'll turn to a composition that is more dependent on instrumental accompaniment and has a less recognizable Yiddish vocabulary.

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צו דיין געבורסטאָג

ווען אין טאָג פֿון געבוירן
וואָלטסט געוויסט, וואָס ס'לעבן ברענגט,
וואָלטסט דאָן זיכער ציריק זיך קערן,
אָן דער וועלט זיך נישט פֿאַרבענקט.

ווייל די צרות און יסורים
לאַזן קיין מאָל דיך צו רו,
זיי אויפֿשליסן דיר די אויגן
און זיי שליסן דיר זיי צו.

For your Birthday

If on the day you were born,
You had known what life would bring,
Surely you would have turned back,
And not yearned for this world.

Because anguish and agony
Never let you rest,
They open your eyes
And they close them too.

This piece starts with a repeating phrase of rapid 16th notes. It is not immediately recognizable as belonging to any traditional Ashkenazic idiom. The text is sung slowly while the 16th note accompaniment continues, implying different harmonies but keeping the rhythm constant. Then, halfway through the song, the texture changes, the 16th notes cease, and the voice holds sustained notes supported by chords on the accordion and chromatic melodies played on the clarinet, which answer the vocal phrases. The piece ends with a short *hora*, a rhythm from Yiddish instrumental music, which most listeners experience as a waltz.

An audience member listening on the expressive plane may note the contrast between the sung melody and the accompaniment but is unlikely to have any literal understanding of the text. What they may understand is mediated by the composer's technical choices: the sung melody does not have a typical accompaniment but instead a tense melodic counterpoint implying shifting chromatic harmonies. The middle section, during which the instruments sustain longer notes together with the voice, is dissonant. The piece ends with a dance.

These compositional choices can hardly be said to convey any literal translation of the text but they do place the song inside of a specific expressive world with its own implications, associations, and meanings. I initially set this melody as a tango but was dissatisfied with that approach. I did not feel that a tango matched the complexity of the text itself and setting the piece as such felt like a parody. Setting it, however, as a contemporary art song implies that the text is worthy of this style and contains material of gravity. An art song would be listened to in a concert hall, with the undivided attention of the audience, not as background music for dancing or socializing. In this case the associations of genre matched how I wanted the audience to listen to the text.

The next and final example is a piece called *A tog fun nekome*, a day of revenge.
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א טאָג פֿון נקמה

און איד זאָג אייך, ברידער, געדענקט, וואָס איד זאָג!
די איינציקע טרייסט און נחמה.

ס'וועט קומען, איר הערט? ס'וועט קומען א טאָג,
וואָס וועט פֿאַר אונדז נעמען נקמה.

נקמה פֿאַר אונדזערע לייַדן און פֿיין
פֿאַר בלוט, וואָס די שונאים פֿאַרגיסן,
נקמה פֿאַר די, וואָס פֿון זייער געביין
וועט קיין מאָל מענטש זיך דערוויסן.
נקמה פֿאַר מעשים אין סדום נישט געהערט,
פֿאַר מאַמעס, יתומים, אַלמנות,
נקמה וועט שרייען אַרויס פֿון דער ערד
דאָס בלוט פֿון מיליאָנען קרבנות.

דער מענטש וועט דערוואַכן, קיין ספֿק נישט מער,
דערזען דעם גרויל פֿון מלחמה.
ווי אונדזערס אַ נביא אַ הילך טאָן וועט ער:
נקמה! כּוועל נעמען נקמה!

ס'וועט קומען דער טאָג. יאָ, איך האָף און גלייב,
איך זע, ברידער, זיין אַנקום פֿון ווייטן.
און ברענגען וועט ער אונדז ווי נחס א טויב
אַ בשורה פֿון פֿרידלעכע צייטן.

A Day of Revenge

I tell you brothers, remember what I say!
This is the only comfort and consolation.
There will come - do you hear me - there will come a day
Which will take revenge for us.

Revenge for our suffering and pain,
For blood that the enemies spill,
Revenge for those whose remains
No one will ever find.
Revenge for deeds unheard of in Sodom,
For mothers, orphans, widows.
Revenge will scream out from the earth
The blood of millions sacrificed.

Man will awake, I have no doubt,
And comprehend the horror of war.
Like one of our prophets he will sound an alarm:
Revenge! I will take revenge!

The day will come, yes, I hope and believe,
I see, brothers, its distant arrival.
And it will bring us, like Noah's dove,

A message of peace.

Aesthetically, this setting is a pop song. It has a simple rhythm, a tonal and catchy melody, simple harmonies, electric guitar, accordion, piano, bass, and drums, all employed in very conventional ways. Very often, those who hear *Two Worlds* tell me that this is their favorite piece due to the music. It is so beautiful, they say. Yet this is the darkest and most vitriolic text in the entire song-cycle. The music, however, makes it approachable, likable, hummable. When composing this text, I imagined a kind of anthem: a hall full of tipsy, uncomprehending listeners swaying back and forth to the rhythm, wooden tables damp with spilt beer as the audience banged their mugs to a song about the imagined revenge that could bring Gebirtig's captors to justice. More specifically, I set this piece soon after I had begun touring more extensively in the German-speaking world and was beginning to observe how much Yiddish a German speaker understands. The key words in this text are not of Germanic origin: *nekhome, nekome, sonim, masim, sdom, yesoyim, almones, korbones*. Without those words the text becomes inoffensive and with the musical setting, it becomes pleasant. I composed this text imagining the moment when someone singing along with the melody reads a translation or even learns the meaning of the title. I was particularly interested in the way music may be used to manipulate the listener into apparently endorsing a message—by means of nodding one's head, swaying, dancing, smiling—whose content is problematic, violent, or at odds with one's beliefs. I wanted listeners to experience this discordance.

Did this setting aid the listener in comprehending the literal meaning of the text? Absolutely not, but it placed the song in a specific expressive world, one in stark juxtaposition to the text's literal meaning, which was my objective. This is, to return to Shandler, a musical moment in which the secondary meaning implied by singing an agreeable melody together in a Yiddish performance context is in direct opposition to the text's primary meaning. I did this deliberately, but this type of irony and clashes of meaning can occur inadvertently as well. I believe such moments are particularly worthy of further investigation.

Conclusions

My musical choices, in conjunction with the varying levels of Yiddish comprehension of my audience and the broader performance context, can lead and or mislead listeners towards textual understanding. These are my artistic responses to a text, and I do not feel obligated to provide a direct translation to the audience. Nevertheless I must be cognizant of the consequences of my choices. An intriguing aspect of working in Yiddish is the simultaneous challenge of bridging the language gap in some respect while not playing to the nostalgic expectations specific to Yiddish language performance.

This is an initial foray into a deeper investigation of the problems within the context of Yiddish performance practice and audience comprehension. The three planes of listening illustrate processes of interpretation influenced by an individual's linguistic, cultural, musical, and even psychological background. My own compositional and performance choices contribute to this discourse but do not seek to ultimately resolve

the complex relationship between text, performer, and audience. It is the process of exploration, not resolution, of these inherent complexities and paradoxes that generates some of the most salient artistic and scholarly works.