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Moshe Beregovski: The Insider as Outsider

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- suitability to archival interest of Project Judaica

Moshe Beregovski, whose years are 1892-1961, lived through all the ups and downs of being a Jewish scholar in Russia. Old enough to be schooled before the Revolution, he was young enough to be given positions of authority in the mid-1920s in an atmosphere of relatively open intellectual possibilities. He was unfortunately perfectly placed to have his career truncated by the advent of World War Two, then to be displaced by the onset of late Stalinist anti-semitism. He spent a few years in the gulag and did not live long enough after his release to profit from the poststalinist moment of cultural opening. Some of his work was published posthumously, but only fragmentarily, as Jewish themes were not exactly high on the list of publishing priorities in the Brezhnev era, nor are they now. So it is in the United States and Israel that Beregovski's work has gained appreciation, with translation editions that are known across Europe better than the originals, most of which remain unpublished to this day. Beregovski began his work in Kiev in 1926, running a Department of Jewish Music within the Jewish Division of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, an amazing niche given what was about to happen. He did enormous fieldwork, and sent out many collectors, as well as gathering large amounts of manuscript materials. He published in Yiddish, Russian, and Ukrainian, a sign of his complex positioning. *outside 5 volumes*

The entire Beregovski archive was recently discovered in Kiev, decades after it was thought to have perished, and is essentially being held for ransom by its Ukrainian keepers at the present. So we still are not able to fully measure the extraordinary scope and brilliance of Beregovski's work, which I will not take the time to summarize here. Suffice it to say that it represents the only serious ethnomusicological work anyone did anywhere on eastern European

Ashkenazic folk music and folk drama. Not in Poland, where some collecting of folklore was done, nor in Hungary, Romania, or anywhere else, was there a gifted scholar of international caliber like Beregovski who felt called upon to devote time and energy to documenting the wellsprings of Yiddish folk creativity.

For the purposes of our conference topic, I am interested in viewing Beregovski as an insider who was an outsider not just in one, but in two social and intellectual contexts. He was a Jew among Jews looking for ways to deal with their traditions, and he was a Russian scholar, trying to find his own, distinctive voice within a fairly narrow circle of Russian folklorists. Among the small group of Jewish composers and critics who took up the task of collecting Yiddish folklore in the Russian Empire and early Soviet Union, Beregovski stood apart in his attitude, as well as his accomplishments. Within the professional world of Soviet folkloristics, and even in the international field of ethnomusicology of the late 1920s and 1930s, Beregovski was also something of an outsider. How and why he worked and thought the way he did is not clear; no one sat down with him to get the necessary oral history, so we have to reconstruct his thinking from his essays and his projected publications of folk materials.

Let me begin with Beregovski's position within Russian folkloristics, then turn to his relationship to Jewish circles. Like the rest of European ethnomusicology and folklore research, the study of the heritage and practice of the peoples of the Russian Empire was largely based on romantic, class-related assumptions. Peasants were viewed as organic exemplars of tradition, carriers of a kind of cultural genetic code on which a national identity could be founded. Peasants were understood to be grouped into sharply-defined groups to which labels could be affixed, like "Russian," "Little Russian," or Ukrainian, and so forth. It was admitted that there might be two reasons to look for comparative themes, for linkages across self-sufficient groups: first, to confirm the existence of deep layers of ethnic connections, helpful for defining something like pan-Slavism. or for showing that the Hungarians were not Slavs, but some kind of modernized Central Asians. Second,

comparativism was necessary to have folkloristics follow the model of philology, the premier science of the romantic age, where scientific methods could be deployed to trace the origins and diffusion of cultures across wide geographic and historic expanses. These findings could also be used for nationalist purposes, as the extreme versions of National Socialist research in Germany showed with its creation of the "Aryan" race.

Beregovski stood apart from these basic assumptions. His position is very well articulated in an essay of 1930, published in Yiddish in 1932, called "On the tasks of Jewish musical folkloristics," a domain of scholarship we would nowadays call ethnomusicology. As he explains, his methodology had to be different, partly due to the situation of the group he was studying, the Jews, who were not peasants. As he described it, "Jewish music-folklore arises essentially from another social atmosphere, from other social strata: from a small-town and city artisanry, apprentices, petty tradesmen, from *luftmentshn*, [the Yiddish term for disenfranchised men who could find no steady work so existed "in the air," so to speak], from the 'lump,' and, in a defined transitional period, from the proletariat."(Beregovski 1932:116)

Such a situation was created by two facts: the Jewish diaspora, with its lack of the requisite homeland orientation for "normal" folk music development, and the Russian policies of Jewish economic and social restriction and repression. Still within these bounds, Beregovski could have looked for the authentic and the ancient, but instead he says this:

Is it possible to speak of "Jewish music" when it has been created by different classes, strata, and groups across a wide geographic spread among differing economic, social, and cultural circumstances and as a minority in a diverse "national-musical" environment. Can there be a general, unified musical language, or can one find just identical musical expressions, intonations, turns, rhythms, and so forth? (ibid.:115)

This is a surprising stance for the ethnomusicology of 1930. I cannot think of another scholar of that time who would so flatly declare

the impossibility of a unitary reading of a folk music tradition. With its interest in diasporas and displacement, it reads like a statement from our times

Beregovski was also far ahead of the standard ways of thinking when he pushed the importance of doing urban ethnomusicology, which only began to emerge in the late 1960s. He says:

To date, collectors have oriented themselves basically towards the small-town Jewish population and have practically completely ignored the larger cities. Cities like Odessa, Kiev, Kamanets, Vinnitsa, Zhitomir, Berdichev, Uman', Belaia Tserkov' and many others should arouse the greatest attention of Jewish ethnography in general and ethnomusicologists in particular.

One might assume that Beregovski is simply speaking demographically, since Jews were moving to the cities in large numbers in the early twentieth century, but he also stresses the complexity of rural-urban interaction as a two-way street, again remarkably prescient for the time of writing. Another area in which Beregovski markedly diverged from the norm was in his appreciation of the value of commercial recordings. It was only in the late 1970s in the United States, the country with the most extensive development of ethnomusicological theory, that we began to take seriously the enormous contribution that early sound recordings make to our understanding of how older music systems work, regardless of the fact that the inspiration for doing the recording was crassly capitalistic. Here is Beregovski's view: "Commercial recordings are also scientifically useful and should be collected. The enormous diffusion and influence of recordings has made a real difference in studying music in the twentieth century." (ibid.:139)

Summarizing this section, let me stress the sophistication of Beregovski's approach vis a vis the scholarship of his time. True enough, the Jews offered a special case, and he was perceptive in noticing the methodological implications. But he was also farsighted enough, and completely removed from the general run of Russian folk music scholarship, to see that these were common concerns of how we study "music in the twentieth century," as he puts it. What I am

pointing to is his acute sense of the need to understand traditional music in its setting, rather than treating it as a body of pristine, catalogable corpus to be filed away in archive drawers. He strongly argued for what one might call the semantics of the music, the need for finding the context of the music. As he says in the introduction to his projected second volume of Yiddish folksongs, prepared for publication in 1936 but never released:

Classifying and grouping folk music items according to their formal-musical traits, isolated from the song text of the content expressed by the melodies is to ignore the expressive power of folk music (and of music in general). It means one regards the work of music...as a sort of kaleidoscope, an accidental play of concretely concatenated musical elements. It is in this vein that Beregovski chooses to criticize no less a giant in the field of folk music studies than Bela Bartok, whose many volumes set a kind of "gold standard" of how to dissect and categorize mountains of folksongs collected and transcribed by the scholar. Beregovski did not stand completely alone in the field of folk music scholarship; he had a supportive relationship with Klement Kvitka, who also worked in Ukraine, another broad-minded, contextualizing ethnomusicologist. But Beregovski's concerns go far beyond Kvitka's in emphasizing the complexities of trying to sort out what is "indigenous" or "autochthonous" in a people's musical resources, and in his open-mindedness to a broad range of materials, such as commercial recordings.

Let me turn to Beregovski's location in the field of Russian Jewish music. In 1908, an historic turning point occurred with the founding of the St. Petersburg Jewish Music Society. The immediate impetus came from none other than Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who licensed his Jewish composition students to use themes from their background rather than mechanically basing pieces on Russian folk materials. From then until the decline of ethnically based aesthetics in the 1920s, this circle of dynamic young composers, scholars, and critics completed an enormous cycle of writings and compositions. Under the pressure of history, they scattered, many moving to Palestine or the United States. In terms of our topic,

ethnomusicology, the circle's most ambitious undertaking was an expedition to the Jewish hinterland in 1912-1914, underwritten by Baron Gunzburg of St. Petersburg. The writer Shimon Ansky and the music critics and researchers Joel Engel and Zalman Kiselhof did the bulk of the documentation. Beregovski took over their archive when he established his own center in Kiev, so was in a good position to critique their work.

An idea of the St. Petersburg circle's cultural politics can be gained from looking at the debate between Engel and another activist, the composer Lazar Saminsky, that raged sporadically from 1915 to 1923 over the authenticity and value of different components of the traditional Jewish folk music system. This was originally an in-house Jewish argument, but resonates with larger issues that ended up dominating Soviet ethnomusicology in which Beregovski was enmeshed. Some quotes from Saminsky's position will show how much of an outsider Beregovski was to the rhetoric and positioning of those who first established the need for a Jewish ethnomusicology. Engel was more broadly in favor of the value of a variety of folk sources, including the Hasidic song, whereas Saminsky despised not just the Hasidic repertoire, but all the melodic sources he felt were alien to some vision he had of an ancient, pure Jewish music that could serve as the basis for a national school of composition; here is some of his prose:

The banal, the racially neutral, the muddy and rickety, the flagrantly borrowed element of our music, should be weeded out mercilessly from the cycle of means in use by our young creators. Otherwise this element is a source of feebleness and instability in our budding national-musical organism. And our young composition is doomed to a work nationally insignificant (Saminsky 1934: 247)

Saminsky particularly championed what he saw as the ancient elements of synagogue chant, which he described as "our religious music, the most characteristic and stately elements of Jewish folk-art" (ibid.:231). He wrote about "...the primacy of our old traditional sacred melos, a superiority flowing from its racial purity." (ibid.:

232) and "...the elevated type of Hebrew sacred chant with its aroma of antiquity" (ibid.:4)

Beregovski was totally removed from the thinking of a Saminsky, who could speak of "the well known traits of the vagabond pan-Oriental music which I perceive only too vividly in the inferior type of the chassidic melody and in many of our domestic *pseudo*-folksongs." Particularly telling is Saminsky's rejection of the argument that if the Jews liked certain imported musical elements, that meant there was some value in them. He negated the development of the Yiddish theater song, the improvised verses of the wedding emcee, the *badkhn*. and the adoption by Jews of non-Jewish tunes. Beregovski critiqued Saminsky and Ansky, leader of the Gunzburg expedition, for the limited focus of their collecting work. He not only pointed to the importance of collecting each and every manifestation of ethnic musical taste, but also felt strongly that the adoption of outside musical ingredients into a musical mix had its own logic and importance:

"Foreign" elements do not infiltrate in some kind of mechanical way from one people to another; they are adopted by other peoples and re-formulated only when they are "sound-suitable," appropriate for specific musical expressive needs. (Beregovski 1932:117)

What those needs might be was to be the object of ethnomusicology, rather than a mechanical sorting-out of musical elements into categories. This basic stance left Beregovski outside both models of how to study a folk music. He felt alien from the mainstream Russian and European approach of categorization according to principles of genre, function, and musical structure, saying this:

If one conceals, or puts aside, the essence and content of a work of folklore, if one takes as a priority the various formal musical elements...as being independent, self-sufficient--all this means not wanting to, or not being able to take on the essence, the substance of the folklore, or of art as a whole (Beregovski 1934, n.p.)

But he was just as far removed from some of the thinking of the St. Petersburg school, with its quest for authenticity. What he meant by

“the essence and content of a work of folklore” was not its genuine Jewishness in some essential way. Rather, he saw folk musical systems as a more general process, of a group feeling its way in a crowded and difficult world towards its own aesthetic, selecting what it found useful to express the emotions of a particular point in space and in history.

Beregovski's very independence, his position as a double outsider, left him with unresolvable tensions that break through the careful facade he erected to face the world. In this brief talk, I will just touch on two contradictions. The most glaring is his relationship to his own period of most intense work, the 1930s. In the introduction to the projected second volume of Yiddish folksongs, the mood shifts suddenly from careful attention to the details of methodology to a tone of panegyric in favor of the “new, free” Yiddish folksong evolving under conditions of socialism as happy Jews, released at last from all social restriction, become happy farmers singing praises of the Soviet homeland. At this late date, it is easiest to ascribe this irruption of enthusiasm to the political dangers of the day and the need to toe the party line.

But there is a second, grayer area of sensitivity I want to cite: Beregovski's inattention to the internal interchange between sacred and secular music in the Jewish society he researched so meticulously. He did devote an entire volume of his planned anthology to the *nign*, that Hasidic tune-type so despised by Saminsky, and is remarkably appreciative of the way the Hasidic stress on melody kept old tunes alive and flourishing that might otherwise have been lost to Jewish tradition. But he still treats the *nign* as a somewhat isolated phenomenon. At other points in his work he even more strongly avoids the question of the intertextuality of musical sources. This is very noticeable in his discussion of the singing style of the *purimshpil*, the folk drama, usually on biblical themes, performed once a year at the carnival holiday of Purim. Beregovski prepared a huge anthology of *purimshpil* texts with complete melodic notation, a stunning and unprecedented contribution to Jewish folkloristics. In these plays, there is a style of formalized recitation of text that grabbed his attention, since he

spends many pages trying to trace the source of the style. As it happens, I have one example of a Beregovski recording of this *purimshpil* style I can play for you. In the play, particularly the *Ahashveros-shpil* that tells the story of the book of Esther, the basis for the holiday of Purim, this is the style of the court characters, the king, the evil vizier Haman, and the courtiers. [ex.]

Beregovski combed the entire literature available to him on the topic of European folk drama to set the *purimshpil* in context. He suggests connections with German folksongs as transcribed in the classic nineteenth-century anthology of Erk and Böhme; let me sing one of those for you. It seems a far-fetched analogy for the *purimshpil* recitative style. Nowhere in his discussion, despite his manifesto about tapping all the varied sources of Yiddish melody, does he suggest that the aesthetic of the cantor and the prayer-leader might be the obvious source for this court recitative. Knowing that Beregovski grew up in a traditional small-town setting with its stress on constant daily performance of sacred text, why does he neglect this cross-referencing of tradition? It could be that politics enters again; certainly it would be safer not to point to a religious style of chant as a source for folk creativity in the late 1930s. Yet he did put together the *nign* volume, equally risky if we follow that line of thinking. Was he really personally disinterested in the expressive performance of sacred text? It is at this level of ambiguity that Beregovski becomes a fascinating figure. Perhaps this skillful scholar who was the son of a *melled*, a Hebrew teacher, had become something of an outsider to his own upbringing.

There is a final variety of outsidersness in Beregovski's work. In the introduction to the unpublished second volume of folksongs, he raises the issue of the scholar's relationship to the people he studies. He points out the problem: you can't do effective fieldwork without the enthusiastic support of your informants. He couches the problem in the language of his day, speaking of the need to popularize the work of collecting and analyzing folklore among the proletarian masses to gain their help. What interests me is his understanding of people's relationship to folk culture in the 1930s: "The working masses already relate critically enough to the

folksong, so just for this reason it won't be hard to arouse in them the scientific-critical interest in folklore items as an object of historical research, and thereby to win their collaboration for our work." I can't help wondering just what he meant by the masses relating critically to the folksong; given the language of the day, this might encode his own critique of the "social command" he himself was supposed to represent, particularly in his sector, Jewish culture.

At the very least, it seems clear that the fusion of Russian and Jew, our topic at this conference, comes at some expense to the individual, who is himself an intersection of very different paths at a dangerous crossroads in the history of the Russian intelligentsia, the Jewish intelligentsia, and the "working masses" of Jews Beregovski worked with. In all these contexts, he was the consummate insider and the ultimate outsider.

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