Introduction

Jewish Music—Song Culture and Performance Practice

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For the main part, the articles for this special issue came into being thanks to the symposium The Matrix of Yiddish and German Cultures, held July 17–19, 2011 as part of the Yiddish Summer Weimar (YSW) festival.1 Its artistic director Alan Bern had the visionary idea to dedicate two years of YSW (2011 and 2012) to the question of how Ashkenaz I and II are musically interrelated. The results were nothing short of spectacular, due to the fact that workshops and symposium combined scholarly methods (Jewish Studies, musicology, ethnology and the like) with concrete knowledge and experience of practicing, professional musicians who are at home as performers in the worlds of Ashkenaz I and/or II, and those of the ‘keepers’ of written, material culture, namely the librarians and archivists.

Thus, important ideas were formed quasi en passant, as in the case of Walter Zev Feldman, who defined the dichotomy ‘embedded versus transnational’ for the comparison between Ashkenaz I and II.2 Melodies and song themes were recognized as being part of the Yiddish and German folk or popular tradition hitherto unknown to belong to both. And in the case of Barbara Boock from the German Folksong Archive who helped to identify and clarify many ambiguous references in Yiddish songs due to her vast knowledge of the parallel German repertoire.

These articles comprise but a few penetrating glimpses into what can be achieved if the worlds of scholarship, practice and archival knowledge are creatively combined.

This issue of the European Journal of Jewish Studies presents articles that explore the field of Song Culture in connection with questions of Performance Practice.

1 For the programme and abstracts, see http://www.yiddishsummer.eu/182-o-Symposium.html (accessed April 4, 2014).
2 In his talk “Changing Cultural Relations between Ashkenaz I and Ashkenaz II during the 17th and 18th Centuries—the Case of Instrumental Folk Music”; see also Andreas Schmitges’ article “Funem (sh)eynem vortsl aroys?!—Approaches to the Study of Parallel Eastern Yiddish and German Folk Songs” in this issue.
Practice. They are dedicated in their entirety to the study of Folk or Popular Music, with special emphasis on standing at the dynamic interface between theory and practice. What does this mean precisely?

First of all, Avery Gosfield’s article I sing it to an Italian Tune . . . presents both: examples of Jewish texts in Western Yiddish, Hebrew and Italian that were written in sixteenth-century Italy and the search for their melodies. She collects written musical sources of the period that have the same metrical structure and may thus serve to create contrafactae. Gosfield's contribution is therefore not only an insight into the multi-layered, rich and dynamic song culture of Early Modern Italian Jewry, but also a practical manual and valuable tool for performers. Moreover, the author herself is a professional musician and performs the material presented. Consequently, she has had the chance to work hands-on on the interaction and interdependence of music and texts and to weave this experience into her article. An editor could not wish for a happier combination of scholarship on song culture and experience-based insight into historically informed performance practice.

Gosfield’s work helps to form the awareness that Early Modern songs really have been the ‘popular’ songs of their day. To use the term Popular Music here to set a frame for these articles might seem oddly out of place or even anachronistic, since it has hitherto been applied only to the post-industrial era and its mass media. The industrial revolution and its aftermath have been set by researchers like Tagg or Wicke as the boundary of an epoch with regard to Popular Song. However, deviating from this mode of definition, a new research trend evolved that started to take into consideration the “communicative and cultural practices” of which these objects (the song prints and manuscripts of the Early Modern Period) are an integral part.

Until very recently, Popular Music Studies have focussed on the literary or musical texture of a song, thus defining a Renaissance piece as high ‘art.’ Yet in his book Lied und Medienwechsel im 16. Jahrhundert, Nils Gosch has proven how the term popular music, as used today, inscribes only an artificial boundary. The communicative and cultural strategies and practices in which the

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6 Nils Grosch: Lied und Medienwechsel im 16. Jahrhundert, 35.